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**THE NATIONAL
PARKS**
100 YEARS OF
INSPIRATION
p.112

**FINDING
A FRIEND IN
TOKYO**
p.100

**AT HOME
WITH A CHEF
IN HONOLULU**
p.26



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MARCH/APRIL 2016

Expanded Hotels Coverage Retreat to London, Paris + South Africa p.69



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MARCH/ APRIL

THE
SOLO TRAVEL
ISSUE



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THE PATH TO PEACE

A hike from Serbia to Croatia traverses a land that's healing with each shared toast of Balkan moonshine.

by DAVID FARLEY



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A CENTURY OF INSPIRATION

What artists see when they look at our national parks.

by PETER FISH

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MARCH/ APRIL

THE
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ISSUE



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(or tablet)
in an hour.
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When was the last time you traveled alone? Whether you're a nervous first-timer or a solo-travel evangelist, these 17 stories will get you packing.

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ON THE COVER

This year, national parks such as Arches are our travel muse (p.112).

*Photograph by
Jake Stangel*

On the traveler:
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EDITORIAL

"... to acknowledge how self-sufficient and fearless I can be. Especially with long-term travel."
—T.G.

TRAVELING
SOLO
HAS TAUGHT
ME...

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"... that I'm much less delicate than I thought. I also learned that when in doubt about what to do with yourself, the hotel concierge is your best friend."
—D.W.

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"... that people are really curious to talk to me when they find out that I am a solo traveler. I don't actually find myself alone much."
—E.S.

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Three Perfect Pins:

Hawai'i Island

with Zak Shelhamer

Zak Shelhamer's pictures make you long for your next vacation. The photographer has been named "Best Adventure Traveler" by *The Huffington Post* and the #1 Instagram photographer by *Forbes*. His images evoke powerful feelings that capture the very heart of travel. Here are some of his favorite spots on Hawai'i Island.



HAWAII VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

"Set aside plenty of time, it's a big park and you could spend days hiking, checking out caves, old lava fields, and even seeing an active volcano! Check in at the Visitor Center and chat with the local rangers about locations to explore."



KUA BAY

"My favorite spot to spend the day, relaxing on the white sand and swimming in crystal clear water. Walk along the coast for a little extra exploration."



WAI'ĀNUE (RAINBOW FALLS)

"This classic Hawai'i waterfall isn't far from the road and is a good area for a picnic."



Get inspired at #LetHawaiiHappen

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—J.N.

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Kailua-Kona

@zakshelhamer I've been blown away by just how wild
this land feels. #LetHawaiiHappen #VisitHawaiiIsland



Kealahou Bay

FROM THE EDITOR

In Praise of Solo Travel

WHILE ON MATERNITY leave last year, I started thinking about solo travel. (I recognize the irony that I chose the moment I surrendered my solitude to reflect fondly on the trips that had afforded me freedom and autonomy—my favorite parts of traveling on my own.)

I adore having a toddler, but ask any new parent about alone time and you'll get nothing but a long, loud chuckle in response.

I thought back to my trips to Oaxaca and Mexico City after college, and to Paris when I was weighing a job and a relationship. At the time, I took my solitude for granted, not anticipating that later, when my only solo trips would be for business, I would look back wistfully on those precious weeks when my time was truly mine.

When I returned from leave, I floated the idea of creating an issue of AFAR devoted to solo travel, and I was heartened to hear our staff was all for it. I talked to industry execs and learned that solo travel is indeed on the rise. Many outfitters and cruise lines are waiving solo supplements (extra fees tacked onto trips for those not

sharing a room) in expectation of growth in the sector (more on that on page 80).

Whether you're a millennial new to the work force, a boomer dealing with a high-pressure job, or a veteran traveler whose friends aren't up for big trips anymore, chances are a solo trip will do you good. Going it alone can help you clear your mind and get outside your comfort zone and maybe even make a new friend (for an unconventional twist on that, see "Pay Pal," page 100). Our goal with "The World Is Yours" on page 77 is to inspire you to get out there on your own, to a destination 50 miles from home or 5,000.

As for me, I'm planning a family trip to Switzerland, Denmark, and Sweden this spring. Alone time? I'm promising myself a few hours of quietude while wandering the galleries of the Louisiana Museum outside Copenhagen. Anything longer may have to wait for 17 years or so.

TRAVEL WELL,



Julia Cosgrove
Editor in Chief



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FOUNDER'S NOTE

What Doesn't Make the News

IMAGINE SEEING these headlines scroll across the bottom of the screen as you watch CNN: "Millions of Moroccans go to work, return home, eat dinner with their families." "Tourists visit Jordan's ancient ruins, take photos." "Citizens of Dubai respond to pleasant weather by following their usual routines."

At a time when the news is dominated by dramatic, scary events, it can be hard to remember that these incidents are still quite rare. For nearly everyone on the planet, ordinary life goes on. Yet we often let fear keep us from living life to the fullest.

In the last couple of months, I've been to Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, and I will

soon be going to Jordan. These countries have been relatively unscathed by terrorist attacks. Millions of people live there, millions more visit every year, and yet, when I tell some people my plans, they react with concern.

We Americans live in a country that is far from immune to violence. But when tragedies occur close to home, they can be strangely less daunting, because we know they're an anomaly. When they happen in a far-off land, we sometimes fall into the trap of assuming they're part of daily life there. We write off entire countries on the basis of events in one small area.


When we travel, those illusions fall away with every step

down a busy sidewalk, every chat with a taxi driver, every meal at a bustling restaurant. This, not the horrifying acts of violence that occasionally occur, is real life. And that's why we all need to keep traveling. To remind ourselves and each other that this, the ordinary, is what we all share and should celebrate.

GOOD TRAVELS,



Greg Sullivan
Cofounder & CEO

 Share your everyday moments with me at greg@afar.com.



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Marine Scientist
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KAIWI BERRY
Boat Captain / Waterman
Hale'iwa, HI

DEEP DOWN IN THE BIG BLUE, CONNECTION COMES EASY.

Kaiwi Berry and Saiward Turnbaugh may call different seas home, but their passion for this misunderstood ocean species unites them. In the shimmering water off Oahu's North Shore, with apex predators circling about, they slow their heart rates and find the rhythm of something grand — our ancient connection to the ocean. Hale'iwa, HI

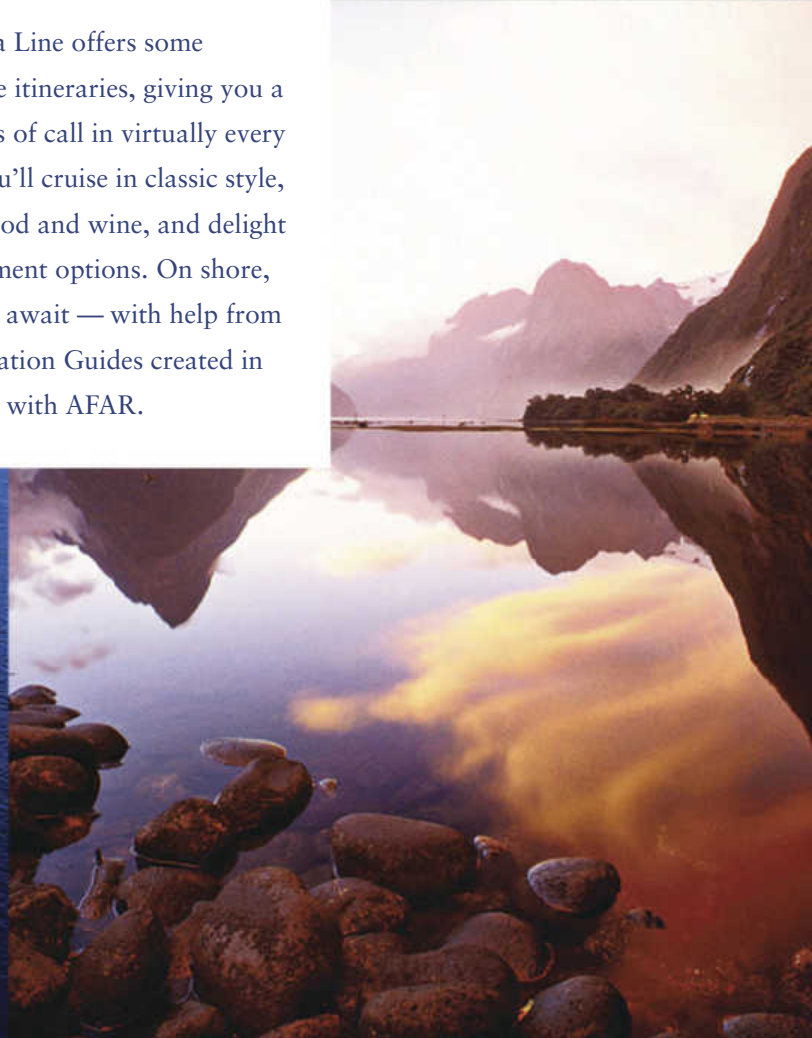
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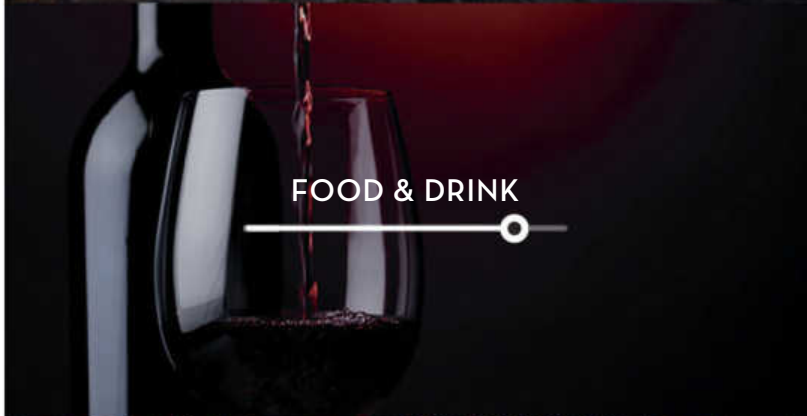
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CONTEMPORARY LIFE

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LANDON NORDEMAN
Photographer
Pay Pal
p.100

The solitude of Tokyo: "Nobody stops and talks to you like they do in other countries. If you're introduced to someone, they are extremely welcoming. But you don't see that on the surface." **A modern friendship:** "We ate dinner with Miyabi, a rent-a-friend from the story, after we photographed her. She invited us. It was an ironic moment: As a professional friend, she still needed friends of her own." **See through his lens:** on Instagram @landonnordeman.



CATHERINE LACEY
Writer
This Is Not Mumbai
p.65

A travel dream-come-true: "I'd always wanted to go to India. When I was a teenager, I thought it would be one of the first countries I'd visit. But this was my first trip." **Walk this way:** "I tend to explore cities on foot, because you see things you'd otherwise miss. In Mumbai, I got confused looks on the main roads because tourists always take cars. But the majority of locals walk everywhere, traffic be damned." **Stroll with her:** on Twitter @_catherinelacey.



ANNA VODICKA
Writer
I Stayed Single in South America p.81

On her go-to solo destination: "People in Peru are so welcoming. More than once, strangers extended an invitation. One time I was stranded at a bus station in Ica. There was a family waiting there. When they heard my predicament, they offered to let me stay with them." **How to connect:** "Always strike up a conversation. I also recommend reading books set in the place you're in—they bring it to life in a different way." **Be her +1:** on Twitter @annavodicka.



ADAM GOLFER
Photographer
The Path to Peace
p.90

Capturing tragedy: "In the Balkans we constantly met people who had been directly affected by the Croatian War of Independence. The story isn't about travel. It's about them." **His personal ties:** "There's always been a sense of mystery surrounding my own history, as I can only trace my family roots back as far as my grandparents. As a result, a lot of my work deals with history, identity, and land." **Investigate with him:** on Instagram @adamgolfer.



EUGENIA LOLI
Collage Artist
Solo Travel: The World Is Yours p.77

It's not about the journey: "I like being in new places, but I hate the traveling part. I'd rather be transported there instantly, like in *Star Trek*." **On transporting the reader:** "I start with key words from a story, then look for vintage images that represent them. The artwork needs a strong central element. In one collage in this story, that's Machu Picchu. It draws the eye, and everything else builds off it." **Be transported:** on Instagram @eugenia_loli.

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A NEW POINT OF VIEW ON HONG KONG

This always gorgeous city is looking particularly stunning right now. A waterfront promenade will soon link the Central and Wan Chai neighborhoods, and on Hollywood Road (which we visit on page 32), souvenir shops have made way for museums, boutiques, and some of the city's freshest restaurants.



W WHERE I'M FROM

FEAST ON HAWAII

For **Ravi Kapur**, the Spam-championing chef of San Francisco's Liholiho Yacht Club, frequent trips home to Oahu are like a soul-food reboot.

by AISLYN GREENE

What's the first thing you notice when you set foot in Hawaii?

People just dress, look, talk, and act so differently. They aren't rushing around on their phones and sending emails. Everything around you says, *You're in Hawaii now. Chill.*

Where's your memory lane?

My mother is Native Hawaiian-Chinese. I used to visit Honolulu's Chinatown with my grandmother when I was a kid. She went there every day to shop and would haggle with the vendors to get the best price. I definitely picked up some of that.

Sounds like the making of a chef.

Yeah, growing up in an intense daily market environment made me so comfortable in that world. It taught me not to think of food as something that you buy large amounts of for a long period of time, but as something you shop for every single day. Farmers' markets are a part of life in Hawaii, whereas in San Francisco it's kind of a newer thing.

What dishes are on your checklist when you go home?

I always seek out Ying Leong Look Funn Factory. For two bucks, you get Chinese rice

noodles rolled up and served with diced barbecue pork, scallions, and black vinegar. I also look for *menpachi*—a flaky, sweet fish that is simply pan-fried with a little oil and Hawaiian salt.

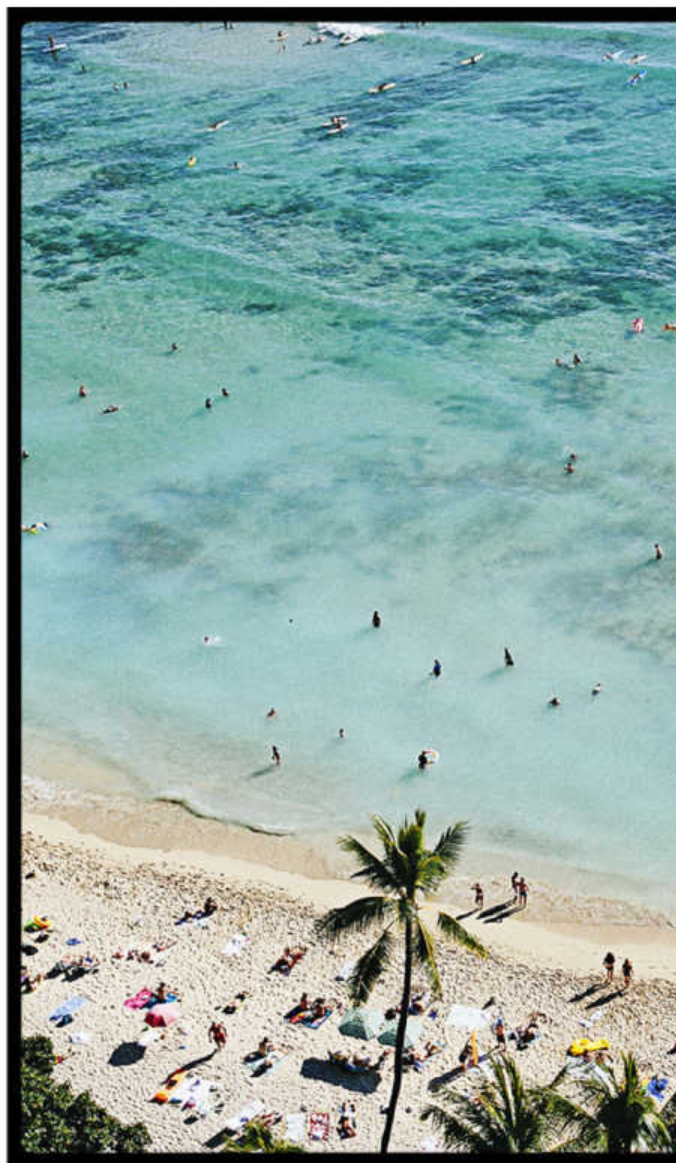
What does a dinner party on Oahu look like versus one on the mainland?

Oh my god, it's crazy! On Oahu, if there are going to be 10 people, that means you're cooking 10 pounds of

pork, 10 pounds of poke, and around 30 fish. You always plan on more people showing up, and they always do. Everyone brings something to share. It could be anything—say, taro that you got from your friend who has a farm.

Any common threads between these feasts and your restaurant?

Probably the warm, genuine, welcoming spirit of aloha that we try to bring. That and the portion sizes.



RAVI'S Cheat Sheet

When on Oahu, you must eat these three specialties.



1

PLATE LUNCH

A base of two scoops of white rice, topped with meat (say, Portuguese sausage or Kalua pork) and gravy, with a side of macaroni salad. Try it at Sugoi's.



2

LAU LAU

Pork, chicken, fish, or veggies wrapped in several layers of taro leaf and then steamed. Ravi's favorite is served at Ono Hawaiian Foods.



3

PIPIKAULA

Beef short ribs that are salted, then dried like beef jerky. At Helena's Hawaiian Food, they make it even better by pan-frying it.

A person with dark hair, wearing an orange tank top and blue pants, is sitting in a meditative lotus position on a vast, white sand dune. The dune's surface is covered in fine, rhythmic ripples. In the background, more dunes stretch towards a horizon under a sky filled with large, soft, pinkish-orange clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

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Handmade in London, the portfolio has an aluminum shell to protect anything precious.

Read issues of AFAR on the bigger, as-good-as-a-laptop iPad Pro.

This battery pack is lipbalm-size but can fully charge a dead phone.



Top to bottom: Bottega Veneta eye mask, \$250, barneys.com; Passavant and Lee portfolio, \$1,150, passavantandlee.com; Piave handmade toothbrush, \$12, mohawkgeneralstore.com; Master and Dynamic earbuds, \$200, masterdynamic.com; Ursa Major face wipes, \$24 for 20, ursamajorvt.com; iPad Pro, \$799, apple.com; Smythson card holder, \$165, smythson.com; Shinola watch, \$850, shinola.com; Anker PowerCore+Mini external phone charger, \$40, anker.com; Samsung one-terabyte storage card, \$379, samsung.com

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THE OTHER HOLLYWOOD

Ten years ago, out-of-towners hit **Hong Kong's Hollywood Road** for trinket shops. Today, locals congregate for of-the-moment art and extra-curious cocktails.

by SARAH BAIRD

1 VEGGIES for FOODIES

Grassroots Pantry is a rare find: a high-end, food-critic-approved restaurant devoted to vegetarian cooking. Come for the lemon chia-seed pancakes, stay for the pan-fried gyoza with Sichuan peppercorns.
G/F, Shop D, 108 Hollywood Rd.



2

THE GREAT MALL OF CHINA

A renovated police barracks, **PMQ** is 197,000 square feet of art exhibits, fashion boutiques, and design shops where goods are made with sharp aesthetics and the environment in mind.
35 Aberdeen St.

3

A TOTAL SLAM DUNK

Thanks to a canopy of trees, **Blake Garden** feels miles away from the traffic and crowds despite being quite small. Stroll its pedestrian-only paths or jump into a pickup game at the basketball courts.
Near the Pu Xing Fang and UN Fong junction



4

GO DUTCH in CHINA

A husband-and-wife team from the Netherlands runs **238 Restaurant**, with shareable plates and a mellow vibe that's just right for couple outings. Look for the nods to their homeland—namely the deep-fried beef *bitterballen* with zippy mustard.
G/F, 238 Hollywood Rd.

5

A DOWN-TO-EARTH BAR

Naturally, the must-order cocktail at **The Woods** draws upon a woodland wonder. For the Mushroom Bourbon, more than a dozen whiskeys were infused with "dried Chinese mushrooms, porcini, shiitake—you name it," says co-owner Victoria Chow. "Frankly, it was one of the worst taste tests we've done." But the oyster variety drew out a pleasant earthiness in Michter's bourbon. The brew is balanced out by vermouth, Cynar, and just a dash of black walnut bitters.
L/G, 17-19 Hollywood Rd.

6

A FULLY FURNISHED MUSEUM

Liang Yi, the city's largest private museum, is devoted to Chinese antiques: ruby-encrusted Van Cleef cases, rosewood altar tables, and other trappings of the good life from the 17th through 20th centuries.
181-199 Hollywood Rd.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TRINNA DE LEON, COURTESY OF BLKSHEEP EMPIRE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION/ALAMY, COURTESY OF LIANG YI COLLECTION, COURTESY OF 238 RESTAURANT



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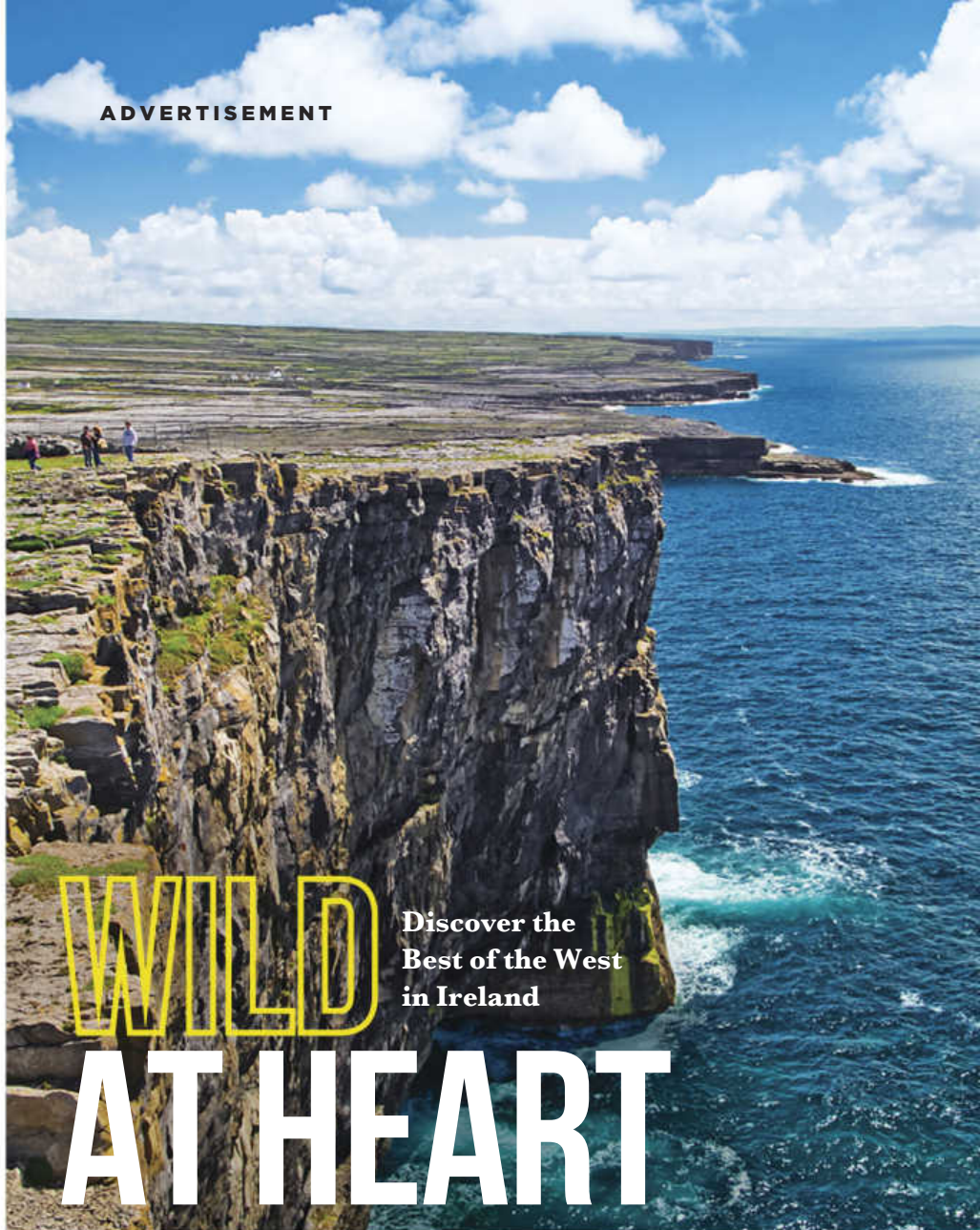
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WILD AT HEART

From Mizen Head in County Cork in the south, to Malin Head in County Donegal in the north, the western coast of Ireland—the **Wild Atlantic Way**—offers everything that makes the country a favorite destination for travelers. Here, the rugged landscape of Ireland's coast meets the Atlantic Ocean along the world's longest coastal touring route.

Behind the wheel of a car is, however, only one of many ways to explore the coast. The **Southern Peninsulas**, the most westerly part of Ireland, are best explored by following in the footsteps

of the former residents of its age-old monasteries. Ferries will take you to the windswept **Aran Islands** of Galway Bay, with its prehistoric forts and medieval castles. If you want to trade four wheels for two, cycling routes range from easy one-day rides for casual bikers to multiday adventures.

You can also explore the Wild Atlantic Way simply sitting down. In the small fishing villages of the **Haven Coast**, which runs from Bantry to Kinsale, you'll find both low-key pubs and gourmet restaurants serving the artisanal fare that has become typical of contemporary Irish

cuisine. The **Connemara Coast** is famous for its storytellers and musicians—one of the most enjoyable ways to experience Irish culture is by ordering a pint and opening your ears at a festival or concert. Along the northernmost section of the Wild Atlantic Way, you'll find some of Europe's tallest sea cliffs (at **Sliabh Liag**) and the highest concentration of Gaelic speakers in the country.

However you choose to explore the Wild Atlantic Way, you can expect to encounter breathtaking natural wonders, historic sites, and locals waiting to welcome you with the legendary hospitality of Ireland. Here is a place to experience the wild soul of Ireland and its people.



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MODO



Cardinal



Máximo Bistrot

1

MEXICO CITY DIALED BACK

The **Roma district** is a great place to find local designers, memorable food, and compelling art. It's also maddeningly crowded. Follow this itinerary to dodge (most of) the craziness.

by SARAH BAIRD

2:00 P.M.

Your Caffeine Fix

Cardinal was the first shop in town to take coffee really seriously. Unlike the vibe in many cool cafés, hand-poured cups aren't served with a salty attitude. It's a friendly neighborhood spot where you can read the paper in peace and enjoy a solid cappuccino at the same time. *Calle Córdoba 132*

3:00 P.M.

Get Lit Here

English-speaking locals come to **Under the Volcano**, the city's most celebrated English-language bookstore, to practice their skills. Discover books by obscure Latin American authors and American writers on Latin America (e.g. Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*). *Celaya 25*

4:30 P.M.

A Time-Warp Museum

Housed in an art nouveau mansion, **MODO**—Museum of the Objective of the Object—is an odd keyhole into everyday pre-21st-century life. You're up close with items ranging from washing machines that were used in the 1800s to funky skateboards from the 1970s. *Colima 145*

6:00 P.M.

Lofty Libations

Run by a veteran of New York City's Le Bernardin, **Máximo Bistrot** attracts a crowd of dedicated foodies, most of whom are not clued in to the new upstairs bar. Enjoy highbrow snacks (*jamón ibérico*), herb-driven cocktails (order any with bourbon), and kick your feet up on leather seats. *Tonalá 133*

2

Transcendental Transportation

Meditation instructor Ralph De La Rosa (ralphdelarosa.com) shares how not to lose your mind on a busy subway.

by ANDREW RICHALE



FOCUS ON ... BREATHING

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FOCUS ON ... CHOCOLATE

"Put a square on your tongue. Get curious about the flavors but also all the energy it took to make the bar and deliver it to you. You won't just appreciate chocolate more. The brain thrives on novel thoughts."



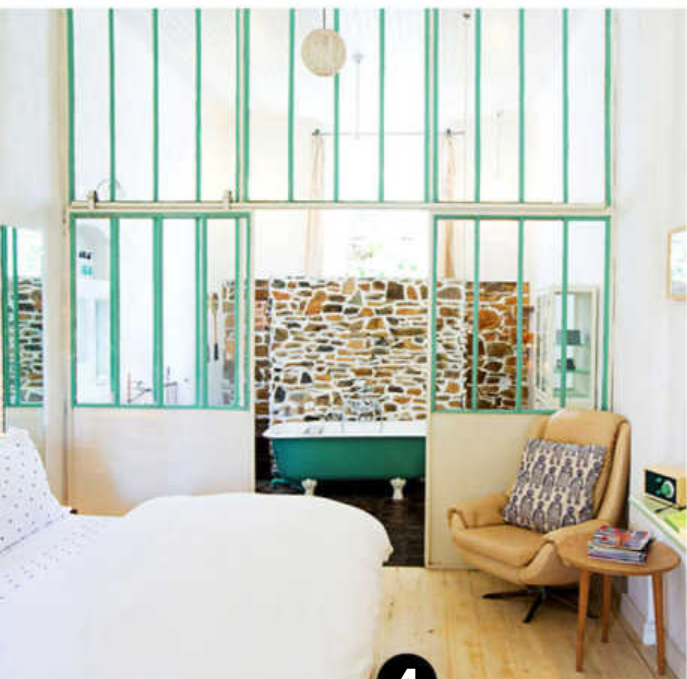
FOCUS ON ... MUSIC

"Turn on an album by Brian Eno, Garth Stevenson, or anything ambient. Zero in on any swelling peaks and valleys or other changes in the soundscape. It'll help tune out all the other noise."

3

Rock Out In Peace

At Seoul's new **Hyundai Card Music Library**, visitors dive into 10,000 vinyl records (including rarities from Led Zeppelin), every issue of *Rolling Stone* ever, and a large-scale work by JR, perhaps the most punk-rock street artist alive. -A.R.



4

THE FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE RETREAT IN SOUTH AFRICA

This peaceful family-run hotel happens to be in the eye of Cape Town's nightlife storm.

You could parachute onto Cape Town's New Church Street without any plans and still have the best evening of your life: Just follow the cheering crowds pouring out of some of the city's most popular restaurants and bars. Then find your escape hatch from the noise, one of six cottage-like rooms at **La Grenadine** (from \$110, lagrenadine.co.za). Situated behind a large wooden gate at the end of a long driveway, the hotel is run by a pair of

charming French transplants (with moral support from their kids and pet shar-pei). The place feels as though they constructed a movie-set version of the South of France—complete with brick and stone walls, a loft with a record player perched above the kitchen, and a row of rooms tucked under an awning in a garden. Consider it your own little slice of Provence in one of the coolest corners of Cape Town. —M.B.

BOTTOMS UP

5

SHH... THIS IS A BAR!

In Chicago, home of **America's best cocktail scene**, the real question is not how you like your drink. It's how quietly you like to enjoy it.

by MARK BYRNE

1. THE VIOLET HOUR



A low, constant hum

The excited murmuring you hear when you walk into this sanctuary-like space? Call it the sound of reverence. The bar jump-started Wicker Park's resurgence, not to mention the drinking culture of the entire city. Order the Daisy 17, a spin on an old-fashioned they've been mixing since the doors opened in 2007.

2. THE AVIARY



Date-night friendly decibels

Mad-scientist chef Grant Achatz, of Chicago's Alinea and Next, doesn't actually man the shakers or chip the ice at Aviary, but it's clearly his brainchild: Behind the bar there's more lab equipment than stirring spoons. The menu changes all the time, but the Carbonated Negroni is imperative if available.

3. SCOFFLAW



Can still hold a conversation

Think of it as the designated corner bar of Logan Square, where cool kids still underpay for a full-floor loft. Its bartenders know their way around the classics (and have a love affair with gin), but unlike most liquor nerds, they don't skimp on the beer. Go during a "Tap Takeover" for rare pours from venerable breweries.



The Aviary

6

The Perfect Lima Sunset

All of **El Malecón park**, a six-mile stretch of cliffside greenery, offers stellar views of the Pacific Ocean. Hit the patch along the neighborhood of Miraflores, though, and that vista is set to music. Around sundown, locals of every stripe gather for mellow, impromptu jam sessions with drums and acoustic guitars. —A.R.



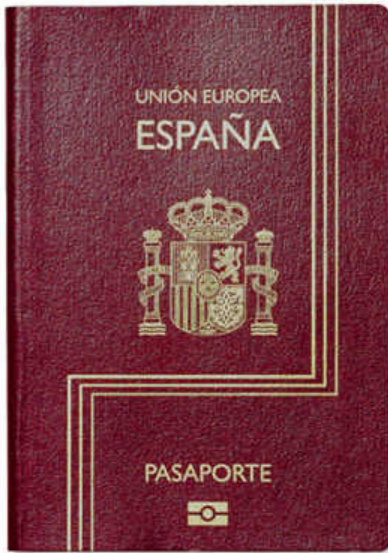
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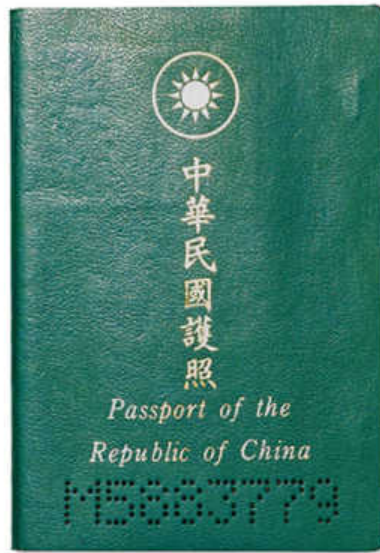
In addition to place of birth, Swiss passports list place of origin, meaning the town your parents came from.

STAMP CHAMPS

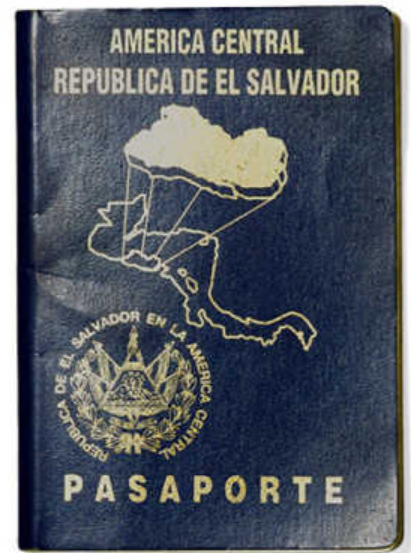
Reasons to love these little books: They show off a country's style, they're a handy record of a traveler's journeys, and, well, we literally couldn't travel without them.



SPAIN



TAIWAN



EL SALVADOR



CUBA



AUSTRALIA



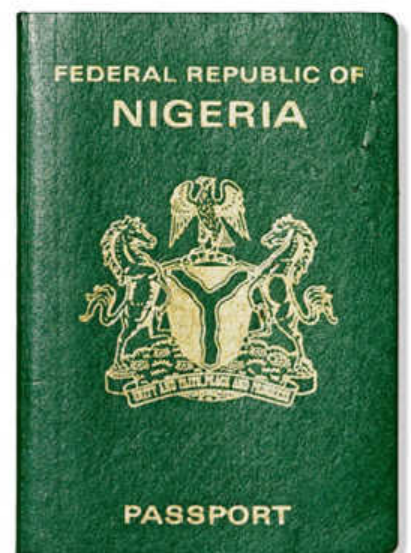
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HOT WHEELS

The paradox of this bike? It has the same construction as modern masterpieces but is **crafted in an Italian home, by hand.**

by MATT PHILLIPS

Nearly all 200 bicycles from the 2015 Tour de France were made in Ernesto's at-home studio. Even though they're made in Ernesto's at-home studio, his creations have won nearly every race there is to win. Not a pro cyclist? Not a problem. He offers multiple fits of the C60 so that even casual riders can cruise comfortably. For an extra-stylish upgrade, opt for the Tricolore edition, shown here, one of 100 with a sexy coat of gold paint.

Nearly all 200 bicycles from the 2015 Tour de France were made in Ernesto's at-home studio, his creations have won nearly every race there is to win. Not a pro cyclist? Not a problem. He offers multiple fits of the C60 so that even casual riders can cruise comfortably. For an extra-stylish upgrade, opt for the Tricolore edition, shown here, one of 100 with a sexy coat of gold paint.

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Bloempot



Louvre-Lens



Palais des Beaux-Arts



Fact Sheet

Location
Northern France

Getting There
An hour-long train from Paris's Gare du Nord

Population
230,000

FRANCE THE PERFECT PARISIAN DETOUR

Why visit **Lille**? Decadent food, spectacular beer, and the other Louvre. (Yep, there's a secret one.)

by SARA PEPITONE

When in Lille, technically you're in France. But its cobbled streets, filled with vendors of bingeable waffles, feel more Belgian. A quick TGV ride from Paris, a trip there is like experiencing two countries at once.

Spend at least a couple of days in Lille and stay at the

Clarence, an 18th-century mansion turned hotel. After check-in, immediately find a beer. The **bière de garde lager** from **La Capsule** is coppery with a toasted sweetness. Prefer blondes? **Brasserie Dupont's** bittersweet **Moinette** goes down perfectly with Maroilles,

a stinky, soft, and transcendent local cheese.

More tasty regional eats are found at the ubiquitous pub-like *estaminets*. For a stand-out, Google **Bloempot**, where award-winning chef Florent Ladeyn serves dishes such as haddock with nettle cream.

The region has been a hub for art since Napoleon. In fact, he ordered the construction of the **Palais des Beaux-Arts**, which holds everything from Rubens to Rembrandt. For something less traditional, try **La Piscine**, a museum that was once an art deco bathhouse. The pool (still full of water), showers, and other features now show off work by Chagall and the surrealists he inspired.

A 30-minute train ride west to an old coal-mining town gets you to the **Louvre-Lens**, an extension of the Parisian art mecca. Half the spectacle is the building itself: Its glass and aluminum walls seem to fade into the trees. Inside, they offer visitors a behind-the-scenes look at the museum's staff at work. As for the art, pieces are rotated from the collections of its famed sibling in the capital. Yet another thing to feast on in this part of the world.

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- Nora, age 16 (Learning AFAR Chicago)



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*Matcha mania:
Turn the page
to discover how the
brew went from
traditional
teahouses to New
York City's first
all-matcha café.*

photograph by KO SASAKI

MARCH/APRIL 2016 AFAR 51



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The secret to matcha's color? Farmers cover plants with tarps to spike chlorophyll production.



Matcha Maker

Meet the green thumbs behind the latest tea craze.

by ALEX SCHECHTER photographs by KO SASAKI

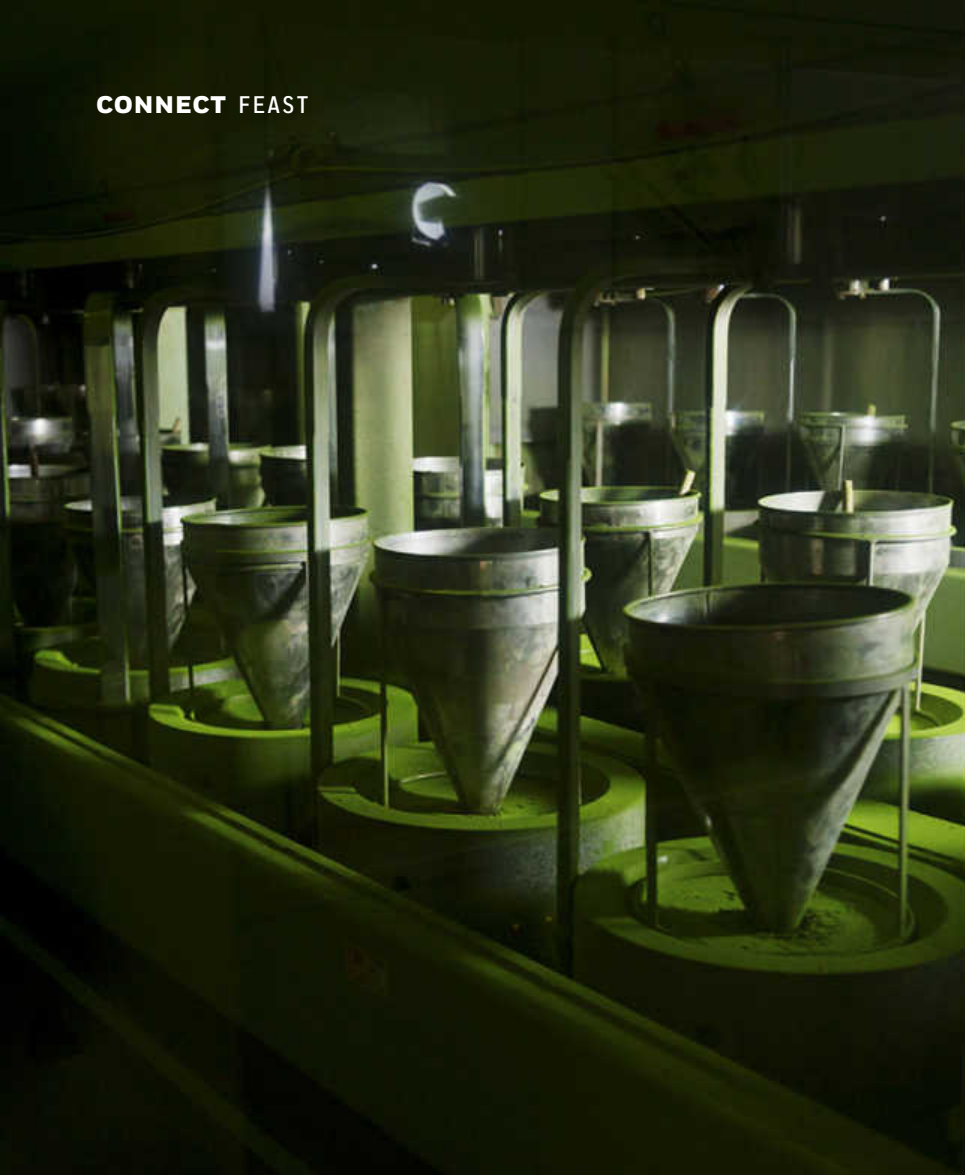
THERE IS A SMALL city in central Japan called Nishio. To get there by train, you take a scenic three-and-a-half-hour ride from Tokyo, past Mount Fuji and the rippling Pacific coastline. Nishio itself looks unremarkable: quiet residential blocks that could be found anywhere in Japan, a few restaurants, all surrounded by flat parcels of green farmland. But mention the city to tea aficionados and they will immedi-

ately respond: matcha!

As Maine is known for lobster and Kentucky for bourbon, the fields of Nishio are famed for growing a variety of *Camellia sinensis*, the mother plant from which most teas (green or black) are made. The leaves from this plant are eventually stone ground and turned into some of the world's finest matcha, a bright-green, powdered tea.

What makes this brew so special? Perhaps

it's the taste: smooth, bracing, slightly bitter. Perhaps it's the mystical, centuries-old ritual of pouring the ground tea into a heated cup, carefully adding hot water, and mixing them together with a small bamboo whisk until the liquid is light and frothy. Perhaps it's the nutrients. Unlike other green teas, which are steeped, matcha is mixed directly into the water and fully ingested, which gives you a bigger boost of antioxidants, caffeine, and L-theanine,



an amino acid that devotees say creates a super calm, focused mental state. In ancient Japan, people thought matcha had magical properties, and Samurai warriors drank it to stay alert during battle. Today, matcha can be found everywhere from high-end coffeehouses to roadside 7-Elevens. But matcha from Nishio

In ancient Japan, people thought matcha had magical properties.

or Uji, another tea-growing region near Kyoto, is still viewed as the *crème de la crème*. There, far from Japan's megacities, the soil is rich and the water pristine, conditions that produce an intensely flavorful, nutrient-rich brew.

Matcha is also having a moment in the United States, thanks in large part to Graham and Max Fortgang, who in 2014 opened MatchaBar, the country's first all-matcha café in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The duo discovered the tea by chance when they were served shots of ceremonial-grade brew in an East Village tea shop. They immediately identified the tea's simultaneously soothing and vitalizing effects as an appealing alternative to coffee.

The Fortgangs source their matcha exclusively from one place, a Nishio farm-slash-general store on an irregular-shaped piece of land that has been owned by the same family for five generations. Every year, the Fortgangs travel to Nishio to help with the spring harvest, a weeklong event that brings the entire town together. Kids take off school, the streets are strung with tiny white flags depicting green leaves and bamboo whisks, and practically everyone in town, from teens to 80-year-olds, helps pick tea.

Five Places to Sip Matcha in Japan

1 FUKUJUE

This well-known tea vendor has been selling matcha since 1790. It recently launched a kiosk in the Kyoto train station near the Hachijoguchi exit with an on-site stone mill that ensures the matcha is as fresh as it gets. fukujuen.com

2 NAKAMURA TOKICHI HONTEN

The famous Kyoto tea merchants opened their landmark teahouse in Uji, 10 miles outside the city. It serves their brand of tea as well as matcha-based sweets. Traditional tea ceremonies, including a leaf-grinding tutorial, are offered four times a day. tokichi.jp

3 KAGIZEN YOSHIFUSA

Kyoto has many matcha desert cafés, but Kagizen, located in the historic Gion geisha district, is one of the most impressive. The treats are as fun to look at as they are to eat:

chewy strips of bamboo-wrapped *kanro-take*, a red bean jelly, and *tama-shimizu*, small, swirled cakes that come in such flavors as matcha and ginger. kagizen.co.jp

4 NAKAJIMA NO OCHAYA

Hamarikyu Gardens, a 60-acre former palace estate with massive pine trees, provides an idyllic setting in Tokyo for this historic teahouse. Settle on a tatami mat for traditional matcha and a pastel-colored *wagashi* (confection), served the same way since 1704. teien.tokyo-park.or.jp

5 GREEN TEA RESTAURANT 1899 OCHANOMIZU

Matcha adds an airy zest to a cold pilsner—at least, according to this century-old Tokyo establishment, which last June began serving “matcha beer” in its seasonal beer garden. 1899.jp



Learn more about Brooklyn's MatchaBar at afar.com/matcha.

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Matcha koicha
(ceremonial matcha)
is a much thicker
version that's sipped
one drop at a time.

A Road Map to the Japanese Tea Ceremony

Traditional tea ceremonies are complicated, ritual-bound affairs. Here's what to expect. (If in doubt, just mimic those around you.)

1

Wait outside the tearoom until the host signals you, then wash your hands and bow to enter.

2

When all guests are seated, the host wipes the teacups and tools with a silk cloth, then prepares thick *matcha koicha*.

The host will then hand the cup to the first guest, who bows and takes it with both hands.

3

The first guest turns the cup, takes a sip or two, then wipes the rim of the cup before handing it to the next person. Each guest repeats the ritual. **The whole ceremony takes place in slow motion**—think of it as a meditation in tea form.



"Our whole business is based around this one product," explains Graham. "It's important for us to be there with the farmers, picking alongside them."

After the harvest, the leaves are steamed, air-dried inside giant netted chambers, chopped up into large pieces, de-stemmed, and sealed in airtight bags in a farmhouse not far from the fields. There, each batch of matcha is ground to order in a mill made from hand-hewn granite until it has a texture

finer than baby powder.

During the Fortgangs' last visit, following a 13-hour day of picking, a segment about MatchaBar aired on a major Japanese network, a big win for the brothers. Japanese tea drinkers find it funny that Americans are only now catching on to something they've known about for centuries. "So for the family that grows our matcha to see the café understood and accepted by Japanese culture," Graham says, "that's the ultimate validation." **A**

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WHO
Liz Lambert
WHERE
South Congress, Austin

At Home in Austin

Texas hotelier Liz Lambert recalls how South Congress went from seedy to stylish, and reveals her favorite spots.

as told to JENNIFER FLOWERS *photographs by* MATTHEW JOHNSON

SOUTH CONGRESS started out as a grand avenue. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was the main road between Austin and San Antonio, and the surrounding area was filled with huge live oak trees, which are still standing today. But in the '40s, a new highway started directing traffic away from the area, and by the time I moved to Austin from West Texas in the mid-'80s it was basically abandoned.

In 1995, when I moved to Travis Heights, a residential area nearby, South Congress was a red-light district. There were prostitutes, junkies, a handful of insurance agencies, and maybe a sandwich shop. One place that continued to thrive, however, was the Continental Club, a legendary music venue that opened in 1957. It's the reason I bought a sweet little motor court directly across the street and reopened it as the Hotel San Jose. I knew that

if I fixed it up, visiting musicians would want to stay there.

Things in the area had begun to look up when the San Jose opened in 2000. Exciting new businesses were coming in, such as the vintage shop Uncommon Objects, and I opened Jo's Coffee nearby just in advance of the hotel.

A few years later, South Congress had transformed into a coveted shopping and cultural district. We were always full at the San Jose and needed more rooms, so we took over an old Victorian building that was being run as a B&B and turned it into the St. Cecilia in 2008.

One of the dangers of this kind of growth, of course, is that you start to price great local shops out of the neighborhood. But for whatever reason, South Congress still feels homegrown and funky, thanks to its bookshops, boutiques, record stores, coffee joints, and music venues. In fact, during South by Southwest and other major festivals, businesses on South Congress set up music shows so that locals have a chance to hear superb live music instead of being mad at the festival for taking over the city. At the San Jose we hold free concerts in our parking lot. I'll never forget the show Alabama Shakes put on one year.

The demand for hotel rooms in South Congress keeps growing. We recently started work on another building that we'll transform into the Magdalena in 2017. We've named our other South Congress hotels after saints, and Mary Magdalene is the patron saint of fallen women, which seemed appropriate for the history of the neighborhood. With 89 rooms, it will have a restaurant and bar, a pool, and a spa, all of which will be available to guests from our other properties, too.

Outside of my projects in Austin, I'm excited to work in other parts of the country. My wife, Erin Lee Smith, and I have places in Los Angeles and Marfa, Texas. But since I moved to South Congress in '95, no matter where I travel, this is, and will always be, home. ➞

1. PERLA'S

The outdoor seating at Perla's, under a huge oak tree on a corner not too far from the San Jose, is a good spot to people-watch while you enjoy seafood pozole and a drink. 1400 S. Congress, perlas.austin.com



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AFAR CONVERSATIONS: OCTOBER 2015

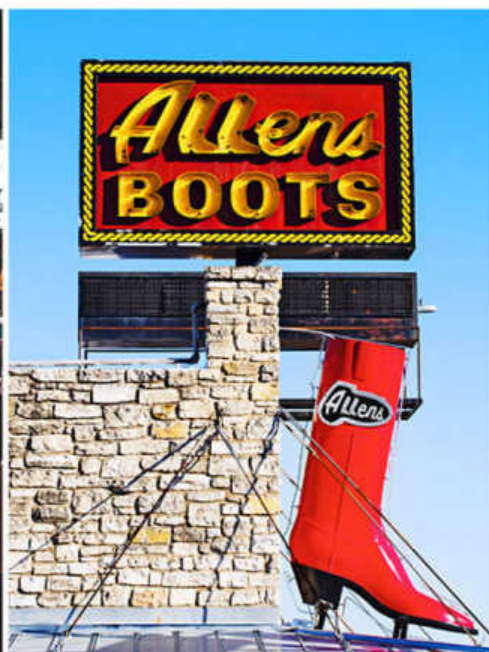
Our October AFAR Conversations event took us to San Francisco, where guests enjoyed a signature cocktail—courtesy of **Emirates Airline**—on the roof of the **Loews Regency Hotel**.

At sunset, the party congregated for a panel on the relationship between technology and travel. AFAR editor-in-chief **Julia Cosgrove** (above left) moderated the discussion with **Caterina Fake** (above), founder and CEO of Findery; **Darren Bauer Kahan**, VP of research and development for Triplt from Concur; and **Andrew Mason**, cofounder and CEO of Detour. Thanks to our sponsors and attendees!



2. C-BOY'S HEART & SOUL

The owner of the Continental Club, Steve Wertheimer, saved this tiny music venue where up-and-comers play. I saw Leon Bridges perform here before he made it big. 2008 S. Congress, cboysheartnsoul.com



3. ALLENS BOOTS

I got married recently, and I bought boots for my wedding reception at Allens Boots, a family-owned business that also sells Wrangler shirts and Stetson hats. 1522 S. Congress, allensboots.com



4. UNCOMMON OBJECTS

The antique dealers offer everything from Western belt buckles to midcentury furniture. I used to visit so often, my border collie would come looking for me here. 1512 S. Congress, uncommonobjects.com



5. FEATHERS

Each of the vintage finds at Feathers feels special. And because I'm a Virgo, I really love how everything is organized by color. 1700B S. Congress, feathersboutiquevintage.com



6. ELIZABETH STREET CAFÉ

This French-Vietnamese café turns out amazing pastries and *banh mi*. It also has Kronenbourg beer on tap; I like to order one while I'm waiting for my *pho* to go. 1501 S. First St., elizabethstreetcafe.com



7. SOUTH CONGRESS BOOKS

I'm a sucker for a well-curated used bookstore. South Congress Books has a solid collection of books about Texas and signed first editions by authors like Alice Walker. 1608 S. Congress, socobooks.com

CONNECT RESIDENT

8. HOME SLICE PIZZA

This is, hands down, the best pizza in Austin. I like the sandwiches, too—the turkey sub is doused with a tangy vinaigrette and can be topped with cherry peppers. The interior is a small space that's always buzzing. 1415 S. Congress, homeslicepizza.com

9. ST. CECILIA HOTEL →

She's the patron saint of music, so we pay homage to St. Cecilia by offering guitars to borrow and outfitting each of the 14 guest rooms with a turntable. We're planning on adding six guest rooms sometime in 2017. 112 Academy Dr., hotelsaintcecilia.com

10. CONTINENTAL CLUB

Everyone from the late blues musician Stevie Ray Vaughan to the Butthole Surfers has played at the Continental Club. Musicians who do big gigs in Austin like to play small shows here afterward. 1315 S. Congress, continentalclub.com



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This Is Not Mumbai

AFAR chose a destination at random and sent writer **Catherine Lacey**, with 24 hours' notice, to the west coast of India, where a teeming city was the stuff of dreams.

illustrations by JULENE HARRISON

THOUGH IT WAS nearly midnight, the highway was dense with traffic, motorbikes whirring through narrow gaps, all the horns a constant staccato. Ganesh Chaturthi was still a week away, but Mumbai was already preparing for this Hindu festival, which fills the city with hundreds of statues of the elephant-headed god, handmade papier-mâché and clay idols that are displayed and danced around for 10 days before being paraded and plunged into the sea. A half-built Ganesha loomed beside

my gridlocked cab. He would be mud again before the month was over.

I was awestruck to watch a man bike past my window with a twin mattress balanced on the handlebars, but over the next few days cumbersome objects being transported on two wheels quickly became mundane—furniture, televisions, families of four, even a large board displaying knives and meat cleavers.

I spotted the knife guy midway through my week in western India, on the seafront road near the Haji Ali Dargah, a white marble

tomb on a tiny islet off the west coast of the city. I'd been watching pilgrims stream across a walkway above the water, heading toward the mirage-like structure. SUVs decorated with flower chains lined the road. Vendors sold snacks, juices, and piles of breadfruit. Children played or begged. There, in the middle of it, was this guy with his knives. It turns out he wasn't just conspicuously transporting his knife collection but was one of the city's many roving knife sharpeners, his bike doubling as a pedal-propelled whetstone servicing everyone from roadside coconut salesmen to chicken butchers. It was one of the many times that something was not what it first seemed to be.

I was on foot after discarding the advice to take cabs because Mumbai was supposedly "not walkable," and though it's true that the city isn't *designed* for pedestrians, it seemed to me that pedestrians outnumbered and often outpaced the clogged traffic. Yet, as I traversed

the city alone, conspicuously foreign, I could not forget the recent spate of horrific violence against women in India that had made international headlines—nor the long conversation I'd had with my friend Siddhartha the day before I left New York.

Siddhartha, born in Orissa and raised partly in Bombay (he still refuses the city's now 20-year-old name), moved to the United States in the mid-'90s. He was dismayed by the rise of a conservative and nationalist political party, the Shiv Sena, and though he's energized by his yearly visits to the city, he's still troubled by its politics and manners. He warned me at length about India's "male-dominated culture" and suggested where I should and should not go, what I should and shouldn't say to a man—any man, even the friends he offered to put me in touch with. And my friend Sara, who spent a few months in India five years ago, told me about the one night she slept alone in a Mumbai hotel where the male employees repeatedly tried to get into her room, as if the arrival of a young blonde woman without a male keeper amounted to a come-and-get-it holler.

"Cover your knees," she advised, "and your shoulders, and your neck, and it wouldn't hurt to cover your whole head if you can."

WITH THIS IN mind and limited hours to pack, I ended up with a suitcase of mismatched blouses and billowing skirts, and no matter what I put on, I looked like a pile of laundry. My lack of coordination felt fine when I wandered around the city by myself but seemed suddenly ridiculous at a book launch in the Goethe-Institut's art gallery, where I'd been sent by a friend of a friend to meet the night's host and moderator.

Thwarted by traffic, an inaccurate map, and the dripping end of monsoon season, I slipped into the back row a half hour late. When I later introduced myself to the thrice-removed friend, a journalist and critic, he asked what I was planning to write about. Without an easy answer, I rambled for a while, which he quietly tolerated before introducing me to someone else who introduced me to someone else, each person departing for better company or the snack table or the door, turning me into a sort of social hot potato, a clueless American hunting for the "real" Mumbai. Finally, after fielding several well-intentioned suggestions of well-trodden tourist spots, I

tried to delicately bring up the question of this reportedly "male-dominated" culture, wanting to prove, I suppose, that I was not a potato.

I was immediately delivered to a woman whose intelligence hovered around her as if it had transmuted into a scent. I was told she'd written extensively about all manner of women's issues, and I quickly sought her expert advice: How was the role of women in Indian society changing? Did they feel the culture growing more progressive, or had there been a conservative backlash? What challenges did they face?

The journalist stared blankly at me, shaking her head and insisting this was not a fruitful line of inquiry though it seemed she may

novelist Aatish Taseer cited India's "cultural chauvinism" in a recent *New York Times* essay—India is also undergoing massive economic growth, which tends to complicate any cultural climate. Mumbai, the country's most populous city, is home to both the freewheeling Bollywood community and rigidly conservative politics; it's rapidly changing in some ways and remaining static in others. To explore this captivating and complex city and reach any understanding beyond its surface is a dream in every sense—a delight and an impossibility.

While walking through an area that seemed pretty middle class, I saw several families living under tarps strung up with twine. Only a few blocks away, Antilia, possibly the world's



Some memories can overshadow what may have changed when we weren't looking.

have been trying to sneak out to dinner, or perhaps she just didn't have time to really get into it. I mentioned Siddhartha's characterization and immediately realized why this woman discouraged my questioning. "Then again," I said, backpedaling, "What country isn't male dominated?"

"Exactly," she said, easing away as if this dense or crazy woman might try again to commandeer her attention. Thinking back on it, I can't blame her. All I had was a handful of anecdotes and a few days, and considering my haphazard ensemble (Tween Hobo on Holiday, you might say), it would not be unreasonable to think I'd gone off the rails. I hadn't caught her name. But I could tell she didn't want to keep in touch with me, a foreigner asking questions too complicated to answer at a book party.

Though my friends, Sara and Siddhartha, aren't alone in their dismay—journalist and

largest (27 high-ceilinged floors) and most expensive (hundreds of millions of dollars) single-family residence, loomed above us all. Named for an island that appeared on and then disappeared from ancient maps, Antilia is home to one of the world's wealthiest businessmen, Mukesh Ambani, and his wife and children, who are served by a staff of hundreds.

Though the very existence of a home this lavish has caused controversy even among the Mumbai elite, it is not the only example of the country's massive income disparity. Of course I couldn't, in a week as an outsider, come anywhere close to understanding these issues of class and wealth, complicated by caste and gender, but I also couldn't completely ignore them. Being on foot most of the time allowed me to notice all the messy in-between parts of Mumbai and make lunging attempts to understand where I was.

One night I had dinner with Kiran Mehta, a travel writer I'd been introduced to via email. She suggested we meet for something called *pani puri* at Elco's Market, a restaurant she assured me any cab or rickshaw driver would be on a first-name basis with.

"You're going . . . to Elco's?"

I said I was.

"You?" he asked again, aghast.

"Yes. For *pani puri*," I said, hoping that name-dropping an insiders' snack would lend me some legitimacy.

Earlier that day he'd done what all cabdrivers did to me here: He had taken me on an unrequested, mandatory shopping detour. The first couple times this had happened, I hadn't realized what was going on, just gotten out of the car, been shooed into a shop, made a confused loop, and returned to the cab empty-handed, to the disappointment of the shopkeeper and the driver. What endears you to a cabdriver, however, if you've baffled him by being a white female ambivalent about shopping, is asking him to take you to Elco's for *pani puri*—crispy little thumb-size shells filled with tamarind water and little floaty bits. He dropped me off with a nod and a smile.

Inside the restaurant, Kiran gamely coached me on how and when to accept a new *pani puri*: You stand at the cauldron where a man assembles and distributes them, one by one, to diners who eat them immediately, before the thin crisp collapses from the liquid. As with any regional delicacy, locals are slightly excited and amused to see an outsider consume *pani puri*; Kiran also assured me she had brought Imodium, just in case.

After a round of these little fried bits of "water bread," Kiran ordered me something that wasn't on the menu, a fist-size edible bowl heaped with crunchy bits, chewy bits, and various sauces and chutneys—a delicious mystery. From Elco's we headed deeper into the Bandra suburb, where the young and well-to-do while away their late-night hours. We landed at Monkey Bar, a new spot decorated with kitschy art, where cocktails are served in mason jars. Ferociously popular, the place was packed, but we managed to nudge our way up to some bar stools. I told Kiran about my awkward night at the gallery and said I didn't know what to make of all the warnings I'd been given about Mumbai's male dominance and unwalkability.

It was typical, Kiran said, of locals who left in the '90s, to recall the city as it was then. Things had changed considerably, but expats

tend to retain the worst memories. They often struggle to see today's Mumbai for what it is, still complicated but welcoming to Westerners and safer for women. Every part of the world has its ugliness, of course, but like a photograph that's viewed too many times, some memories can overshadow what may have changed when we weren't looking.

"In the rural parts of the country, women often have no access to education and are dependent on marriage and men," Kiran explained. But India's population is massive, more than three times that of the United States, and Mumbai was a world away from the more conservative parts of the country. "Women want to live here," she told me, because it's a more tolerant city where they can pursue higher education and careers.

In an auto rickshaw back to the hotel that night, as heavy rain splashed in through the canvas flaps, I thought of how shortsighted I must have seemed to that journalist in the art gallery. I watched people bike, drive mopeds, and walk casually through the dark and pelting downpour, and I thought of how Manhattanites hunch and scurry through even the finest mists.

On a long wander through the city the next day, I ended up at a vegetarian restaurant called Soam, where a 20-year-old student struck up a conversation with me and, when he found out I was in the city as a travel writer, deadpanned, "This isn't Mumbai."

I could hear beautiful music drifting in from Babulnath Temple, an ancient Hindu landmark across the street, and yet, somehow, we were not in Mumbai. "This is one of the richest neighborhoods," he said. "This isn't how most of the city lives."

WAS I IN MUMBAI, perhaps, the next day, when I walked through the Dharavi slum? I was accompanied by a young man named Sunny, a guide from Reality Tours, a company that funds educational programs for residents. In some ways I did feel like I was more in Mumbai while there, ducking through the famously narrow alleyways and peeking into the factories staffed by men and women who help Dharavi gross \$665 million annually, doing everything from recycling to leatherwork to baking *papadums*. Many, however, argue that the slum is more of a city unto itself, in but not of Mumbai.

Could you find Mumbai in the outdoor markets where locals and tourists rubbed

shoulders, or was it in the opulent Phoenix mall where residents shop for clothes, some too inappropriate to wear in public? And which restaurant was more Mumbai—the very impressive Bombay Canteen, which serves delicious, updated Indian fare to international businesspeople and travelers, or the homey place near the art museum where I had a cheap but plentiful lentil-filled *thali*, that quintessential feast on a platter? Or was the real Mumbai only found in the street foods that foreigners are advised not to eat because the water will make them ill?

ON MY LAST FULL DAY, while I was finally checking out the art museum and the touristy Colaba district, I was approached by a group of kids, mostly girls, asking me for food. A charming, tenacious 13-year-old who seemed to be their ringleader sent me into a grocery store from which she was banned, then snuck in a back door to show me the rice and ghee she wanted. Another girl from the group, a shy 15-year-old from Pune, walked along the waterfront with me afterward. She explained that she comes to the city alone for a few months at a time, sleeping on the street and selling flower garlands to tourists so she can bring money back home, where there's no work for her. She didn't tell me this as if it were particularly sad, just that it was what she had to do. She said she missed her family, but it seemed she had so few options that even that nostalgia had become a distant feeling. Those children will always be the first faces I see when I think back on Mumbai, and it is more than disheartening to know that the money and food I gave them may have been taken back to someone pimping them out, which I was later told is pretty common.

That women want to live in Mumbai, that it's male dominated and unwalkable—all of these things are true and not true. So often when we talk about a city, we do so in broad terms. But what that student in the restaurant told me will be right no matter where in Mumbai you say it—this is not Mumbai. I was left with the feeling that I had not seen, that I *could* not see the city, and perhaps that is how it should be; clarity would be a flat lie. As the main stage for much of India's rapid cultural and economic development, Mumbai, in a week, left me with the feeling that something beautiful had just rushed by. **A**

Writer Catherine Lacey is profiled on page 22.

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Springtime Getaways

From rustic retreats near London to an otherworldly home in Joshua Tree, turn the page to see the places we're dreaming of checking into this season.

RICHARD POWERS

**LIME WOOD
HOTEL**
Hampshire,
England



SOHO FARMHOUSE
Oxfordshire

ESCAPE FROM THE CITY Britain's Rural Side

Londoners have perfected the art of the minibreak, and it's easy to see why: Stylish countryside stays are just a quick drive away. Here, **five places worth a detour.**

by JENNIFER FLOWERS

1 Soho Farmhouse OXFORDSHIRE

Distance from London

75 miles northwest,
2 hours by car

The Place

Soho House's latest
hideaway in the

Cotswolds is a next-gen social club and hotel set on 100 acres, with 40 log cabins, a seven-bedroom farmhouse, and a four-bedroom cottage. Forget that stuffy British manor home aesthetic: Furnishings are a chic mix

of vintage pieces, claw-foot tubs, and unfinished wood floors.

Check Out

The property's lake-side Cowshed Spa, with a sauna and steam room tucked away on an island, and the Main Barn restaurant, masterminded by celebrity chef Tom Aikens. *From \$545.*

2 Gilpin Lake House LAKE DISTRICT

Distance from London

270 miles north-
west, 4–5 hours
by car

The Place

With its forested hills and silvery bodies of water, the Lake District is one of England's most popular getaway destinations. For true peace and

quiet, head to Gilpin Lake House, located next to a private four-acre lake on 100 wooded acres that are shared with the Gilpin Hotel. Each of the suites is individually designed, with details such as hand-printed wallpaper,

Pierre Frey fabrics, and modern Poliform furniture.

Check Out

The new Jetty Spa, which commands views of the lake and woodlands through floor-to-ceiling windows. The spa is available only to Gilpin Lake House guests. *From \$430.*

3 The Pig on the Beach DORSET

Distance from London

130 miles southwest,
3 hours by car

The Place

Set on a hill along the Dorset coast, this fifth "Pig" inn from Brit hotelier Robin Hutson is a 29-room retreat furnished with freestanding baths, four-poster beds, and framed vintage botanical prints. In keeping with the Pig's restaurant-with-rooms ethos, items on the daily menu reflect what is growing in the garden or, like the Dorset trout and Purbeck turkey, are sourced within

a 25-mile radius. Come June, you'll be able to pair your visit here with a night at the new Pig at Combe, an Elizabethan-era inn 70 miles west.

Check Out

The 11th-century ruins of Corfe Castle, built by William the Conqueror, 15 minutes away by car; or Studland Beach, a five-minute walk. *From \$200.*

4 Tresanton CORNWALL

Distance from London

290 miles south-
west, 5–6 hours
by car

The Place

Got a little extra time to spare? The scenic drive from London to coastal Cornwall makes for a perfect road trip. Noteworthy stops include Stonehenge and the college town of Exeter. In designer-hotelier Olga Polizzi's Tresanton, once a yacht club, all 30 rooms have sea

TRESANTON Cornwall



Lime Wood



LIME WOOD
Hampshire

views and nautical flourishes (striped bedding, seashell sculptures).

Check Out

The *Pinuccia*, Tresanton's 26-foot yacht, which can be chartered for the day. When the weather's nice, the hotel can arrange sailing lessons in the serene waters of Falmouth Bay. From \$375.

5 Lime Wood HAMPSHIRE

Distance from London

85 miles southwest, 1–2 hours by car

The Place

Once a 13th-century hunting lodge, the Lime Wood, in southern England, has 32 light-filled rooms and a collaboration

with celebrity chef Angela Hartnett to launch HH&Co Backstage, a new on-site cooking school. Guests can take classes ranging from preserving and pickling to preparing game.

Check Out

The surrounding New Forest, populated by wild ponies. Take a walk or bike ride through this former royal hunting ground. From \$460.



BAR NOTES

A Classic Returns

The Ritz Paris hotel reopens this spring after a three-and-a-half-year renovation. **Colin Peter Field**, head barman of the hotel's Bar Hemingway, raises a toast.

"From the moment you step into Paris's **Bar Hemingway**, which dates to 1921, you're steeped in history. It's where Hemingway spent many evenings, and he was followed by other notable writers and photographers. The bar is still a key part of the city's nightlife. When I was hired in 1994, I got carte blanche to create the space, and I introduced a new cocktail menu. I built relationships with our loyal clients, and during the Ritz's recent closure, I hosted dinner parties at my home with these 'Hemingway Orphans' as we called them. They wanted reassurance that the Ritz wouldn't change. Obviously many things have—the bedrooms are larger, the bathroom floors are heated, the garden is more epic than ever. The Ritz's soul though? Completely intact."



The Most Famous Cocktail The Serendipity

"This drink is to the Ritz what the Bellini is to Harry's Bar in Venice. I invented it in 1994, and we've been serving about five dozen a night ever since. It's France in a glass: Calvados with fresh mint, white sugar, crystal clear apple juice, and Brut champagne on top."



The Most Expensive Cocktail The Ritz Sidecar

"In 1923, Frank Meier, the hotel's

first head bartender, created a Sidecar for his wealthy American clients using Cointreau, lemon juice, and extremely rare cognac from 1831. When I updated it in 2001, I dreamt of getting it in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, which requires proof that someone ordered it. Someone did, and it was named the most expensive cocktail in the world. The price today: \$1,500."



The Showstopper Cocktail The Nautilus

"This beautiful creation is like two drinks in one: First the emptied hull of a passion fruit is filled with house-made strawberry vodka, which has a bright red color, then the whole thing is floated on top of a vibrant yellow passion fruit martini." —AS TOLD TO LINDSEY TRAMUTA

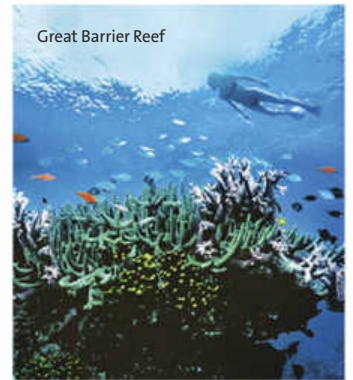


Find recipes for these cocktails, as well as for Colin Field's newest creations, at afar.com/ritzcocktails.

DISPATCH: SINGITA EBONY LODGE

More than two decades ago, the safari company Singita set a new standard for luxury with the debut of the opulent Ebony Lodge, tucked away on a 45,000-acre reserve next to Kruger National Park in South Africa. The lodge recently reopened with a refreshing new feel, thanks to Cape Town-based contemporary design team Cécile & Boyd. Natural canvas and floor-to-ceiling windows have replaced brick walls, and vintage trunks and canopied beds are a nod to African safari camps of yore. *Doubles from \$2,450, all-inclusive.* —JANE BROUGHTON





The Ultimate Australian Must-Do List

It's nearly impossible to count the number of outstanding experiences available in Australia, but we can certainly try. Here, in no particular order, is our list of Australia's most incredible activities.

VICTORIA

Soar Over the Great Ocean Road via Helicopter

The majestic limestone stacks that make up the 12 Apostles are beautiful seen from land, but gazing at them from a **HELICOPTER** — at angles only seen by the lucky few — delivers something else. Floating back and forth along Victoria's mottled coastline reveals a scattering of islands, the sculpted forms of peach-hued cliffs and the wild, frothing Southern Ocean — and no photo-snapping crowds in your way. You'll also glimpse the **GREAT OCEAN ROAD** that ribbons along land's edge, just begging you to follow it. greatoceanroad.info

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Sail Over the National Capital in a Hot Air Balloon

Feeling a **HOT AIR BALLOON**'s cane basket lift off the earth is quite a thrill. As gas is fired into the giant

overhead envelope, there's a sense of rapid elevation; tentatively, you look over the side. Glimpsing the bush-rimmed city of Canberra below, you see the symmetrical design of Parliament House, the country's War Memorial and National Art Gallery, as well as mirror-like Lake Burley Griffin. **TRAVELING** with the wind, it's three hours you'll never forget. dawnrdrifters.com.au

QUEENSLAND

Snorkel the Great Barrier Reef

The Great Barrier Reef's kaleidoscopic colors can't help but impress, with fish and coral in every hue of the rainbow, swaying in harmony with the gentle ocean swell. It's an **INTERNATIONAL ICON** for a reason: Queensland's prime World Heritage Area is the world's largest coral reef system, containing some 3000 separate coral reefs and more than 900 islands. You can snorkel over sea stars and giant fan coral, spot turtles and hover over clownfish, or even swim with dolphins, whales and more. An environment that reveals earth's evolutionary history is every bit as beguiling as it sounds.

TASMANIA

Trace the Edge of Age-Old Coastlines

You'll pinch yourself as you follow the highest sea cliffs in the southern hemisphere along the brand new **THREE CAPES TRACK**, found on the edge of Tasmania's rugged south. The Rocky dolerite columns tower up to 300m, rising from Tasmania's ocean like cathedral spires, and there's no better way to see them than via this newly created route. The 29-mile cliff and bush walk takes about four days and grants extraordinary views at every turn, explaining why it's already being praised as one of the world's premier multi-day walks. Kick the experience off with an eco-cruise, departing from the World Heritage-listed penal settlement, **PORT ARTHUR HISTORIC SITE**, and



Whitehaven Beach



Saffire Freycinet



Ningaloo



Katherine River



Kangaroo Beach Lodge



Sydney Seaplane

spend your nights in surprisingly comfortable, architecturally designed track huts. threecapestrack.com.au

NEW SOUTH WALES

Catch a Sydney Seaplane to Lunch

There are few things more exhilarating than landing on the water in a seaplane. But knowing you have a glamorous lunch to follow adds an extra frisson, doesn't it? Sydney's unforgettable **SCENIC FLIGHTS** pair must-see views of Sydney Harbour, its Harbour Bridge and the magnificent Opera House with renowned destination restaurants. Coasting over the ocean at speed before touching down on a remote Sydney waterway you're led to restaurant gems including **JONAH'S WHALE BEACH** and **BELLS AT KILLCARE**, or you might prefer a romantic, surprise picnic in a secluded spot.

NEW SOUTH WALES

Escape to Lord Howe Island

Can you imagine a place where people don't lock their doors, where bikes are more popular than cars and where only a limited number of visitors are allowed to share the utopian paradise? Lord Howe Island isn't a dream – it's real, and just a two-hour flight from Sydney and Brisbane. The beaches and rainforests have a luxuriously private

feel, yet strangers happily greet each other here. Then there are the turquoise waters, the schools of shimmering fish at local secret, **HERRING POOLS**, and the lush, mountainous ranges. It's how Lord Howe Island will stay, thanks to its World Heritage listing and much-loved status. lordhoweisland.info

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Canoe through Ancient Katherine Gorge

PADDLING beside towering rock walls so big they throw shade across **KATHERINE RIVER**, you glimpse a 7000-year-old piece of Aboriginal art. It's these special moments that make a canoe trip through Katherine Gorge so spectacular – and authentic. Deep in the outback, you'll barely see another soul, allowing your guide to unlock the bush and its secrets as you pass through. The silence and solitude will refresh your being, delivering a perspective you might've lost in the frantic pace of everyday life. travelint.com

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Indulge at Australia's Most Tasteful Island

KANGAROO ISLAND is a microcosm of boutique food lovers and producers, so everywhere you turn someone is creating, harvesting, serving or devouring something delicious. As you tour the seal-dotted beaches,

rolling hills and bush stretches you'll find raw organic honey made by rare bees, tangy sheep cheeses, mineral-rich, edible grasses and king crabs pulled from the deep. The culmination of the island's purest flavors is best expressed by its coast-clutching getaway, **SOUTHERN OCEAN LODGE**. The kitchen sources locally, matching the food (and the wine) to the classically luxe surrounds. tourkangarooisland.com.au

TASMANIA

Shuck Oysters at Saffire Freycinet

Ask any chef: there's nothing better than plucking your food fresh from the source and devouring it on site. That's exactly what you get to do at Tasmanian luxury lodge **SAFFIRE FREYCINET**, which overlooks the crystal clear waters where thousands of plump, sweet molluscs are grown. Harvest your fill while wearing waders then learn to shuck them on an outdoor dining table dressed with a white tablecloth – all while still in the water. It's an incredible treat. saffire-freycinet.com.au

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Swim with Whale Sharks at Ningaloo

From the moment you leap into the ocean to the second you lay eyes on the world's largest fish, this experience is unlike any

other. Huge, gentle whale sharks are mysterious beings, and more congregate close to shore in Western Australia's **NINGALOO MARINE PARK** than anywhere else on earth. They appear at the same time each year, happily feeding on krill and plankton as snorkelers float alongside them. Plus, the World Heritage listed coast they visit contains the planet's largest fringing reef, so there are many world-class aquatic adventures at your fingertips. visitningaloo.com.au

QUEENSLAND

Absorb the Silence at Whitehaven Beach

The views here are so breathtaking that arriving visitors often forget – just for a moment – to take photos of this incredible scene. Instead, they're too busy mentally filming the translucent blue waters that glitter like a million diamonds, the seemingly endless stretch of greenery-fringed **BEACH** and the silica-white sands here on Whitsunday Island's four-mile stretch. Take a short bush walk to the lookout at Tongue Point to see the magical swirling of aquatic colors in Whitehaven's ocean inlet. tourismwhitsundays.com

For more details on these incredible experiences visit afar.com/journeys



JOSHUA TREE HOUSE
Joshua Tree, California

RENT THIS HOUSE

Joshua Tree House, California

The quirky namesake trees outside are just the first sign you've left real life behind.

by ANN ABEL

On Sara and Rich Combs' first road trip to the town of Joshua Tree, in Southern California, they knew they'd be back. "The draws

for us were the surreal landscape, the creative community, and the affordable real estate," says Sara. They bought this 1949 hacienda-

style home last year. "We're completely in awe of the goofy Joshua trees, the precarious boulders, and the inspiring artists who live here."

The two-bedroom house, available to rent, has mid-century modern furniture, vaulted wood ceilings, and a flagstone fireplace

(ideal for those cold desert nights) and is just a 10-minute walk from the village. Watch sunrises on the front porch, stargaze from the Jacuzzi, or simply marvel at the 100-plus Joshua trees—some 300 years old—scattered across the grounds. From \$185. airbnb.com

SPOTLIGHT

The Suján Way

Jaisal Singh's Sher Bagh brought luxury camping to India. With the opening of his latest, **Suján Rajmahal Palace in Jaipur**, he breaks down what sets his retreats apart.

by JENNIFER FLOWERS

Tell us about your latest hotel.

Suján Rajmahal Palace is a perfect example of what we do. This palace in Jaipur has a living connection to the destination because it's the only hotel in the Pink City that still belongs to the Maharaja. In the restaurant, we serve the family's original household recipes.

How do you help connect guests to a destination?

Having relationships with local communities enables us to share another side of India. Jawai Leopard Camp in Rajasthan is known for its remarkable wildlife sightings, but we have also created cultural encounters in the area's exceptional temples. We work with priests so that guests can observe practices that don't exist anymore in urban India.

How do you build those relationships?

At Suján properties our staff is made up of at least 75 percent local people. We also look for ways to give back. For example, a percentage of what we charge for a stay at Jawai goes into a fund to help with community projects, such as a water well or sheds for cattle.

How does your philosophy influence your design?

Each of our camps was designed to both reflect and complement its surroundings. At the Serai in Rajasthan, we used the area's golden Jaisalmer stone to build the plunge pools, and we use colorful handmade carpets, throws, and cushions that contrast beautifully with the stark terrain of the Thar Desert.

EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP: GO AHEAD AND POP OFF

Let's just get this out of the way: Yes, this custom **St. Regis Christofle stainless steel saber**, with its hand-etched sterling silver handle and its \$25,000 price tag, is over the top. Yes, there are much simpler ways to uncork a bottle of champagne. But there isn't a more dramatic gesture to celebrate a special occasion. If you're unsure how to wield one of these, don't worry. Every purchase comes with a hands-on master class, the same demo St. Regis butlers receive as part of their training. —ANDREW RICHDALÉ

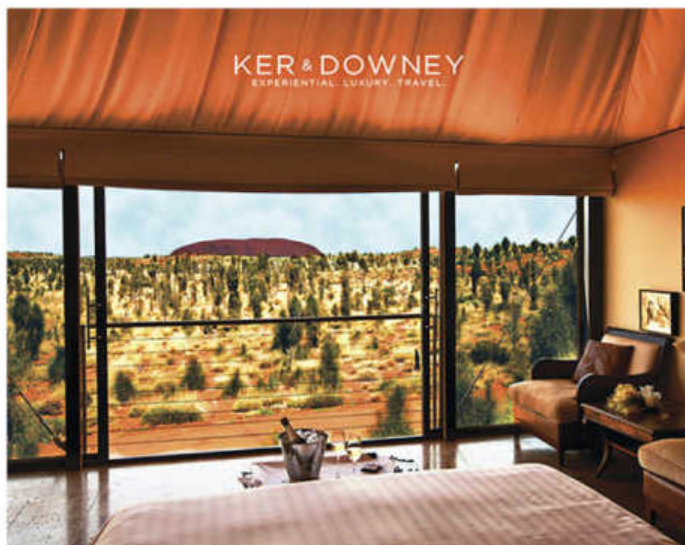


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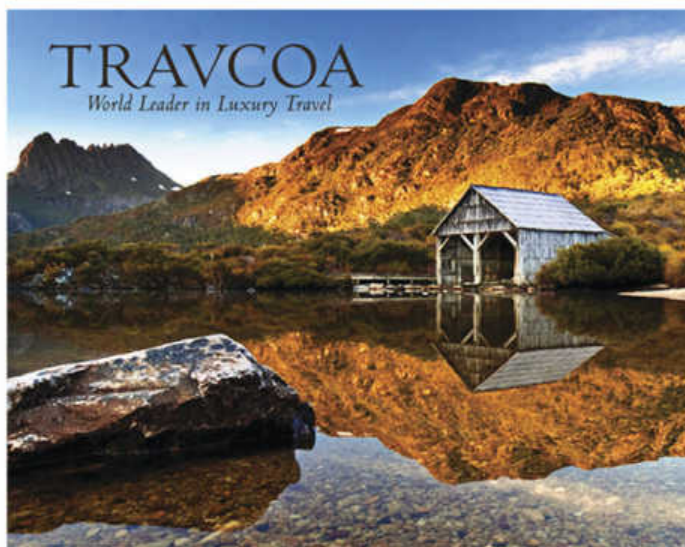
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BE INSPIRED BY AUSTRALIA

Experience not only five-star stays but also enriching five-star experiences. In Sydney, take a seaplane to lunch and sail on the harbor. On Kangaroo Island, where the coastline is carved by winds from the Antarctic, get up-close with wildlife. And be among the fortunate few to play in the Great Barrier Reef surrounding Lizard Island. Book a trip designed just for you. Visit www.springboardvacations.com or call (866) 447-7746.



AUTHENTIC BY NATURE: TASMANIA

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TURN THE PAGE *for* 17 STORIES THAT WILL GET YOU FIRED UP to GO YOUR OWN WAY. ➔

a little advice

FIND THE BUSIEST and NOISIEST CAFÉ you can, and SINK into A GOOD NOVEL.

—NICK ROWLANDS,
AFAR GUIDES EDITOR



it's a wrap

I Was a Bollywood Extra.

"Back to the Future meets Bollywood." That's how a casting agent on a Mumbai street corner pitched the movie to me. What this stranger

lacked in credentials, I lacked in situational awareness. No place had ever disoriented me like Mumbai. And when you're on your own in a massive city, it's surprisingly easy to say yes to being in an Indian time travel musical.

In the agent's unmarked van I sat next to an American girl. We didn't say a word but

caught each other's nervous glances as the journey to a film set "just around the corner" approached hour four. Just as I began plotting my escape, we arrived at a studio lot full of colorful fake buildings resembling a Hollywood Western on acid.

Miss World 1994, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, and her entourage dominated the set. I wore a 1980s purple suit with giant lapels. The director told the American girl and me to act like we were in a "love marriage." I was even given a line: "Congratulations!"

After 14 hours, I received 500 rupees and was taken back to Mumbai. Alone again, I was unsure of my next step. Maybe I'd find a museum. Or maybe I'd end up in a Bollywood version of *RoboCop*. Either one would be an adventure worth taking. —WILL BLEAKLEY

wheel world

I Biked Through Albania. Alone. As a Woman.

The road is blocked by goats again. It really is the last straw. I'm two months into a 10,000-kilometer cycling trip across Europe and the Middle East, and I've just chugged over a truly enormous hill

(let's call it a mountain) between Montenegro and Albania, only to run out of paved road. And food. And water. And then the rain arrived. Right before the goats.

I am saved by a kindly man with a van. The track is just

rumble, hemmed in tightly by cliffs and plunging ravines, and we stop regularly to wait for bulldozers to clear the way. The nail-biting journey takes three hours, and when we arrive at my destination it's pitch-black and pouring.

But the guesthouse is charming: a 150-year-old haven of hospitality, where I am generously fed and pampered.

This is not the Albania I was warned about. Don't cycle alone, I was told. Trust no one. It's a land of thieves.

But along my ride I have encountered only goodwill and the kind of everyday decency that never makes the headlines.

—REBECCA LOWE

Follow Rebecca's ride on her site, the bicyclediaries.co.uk.



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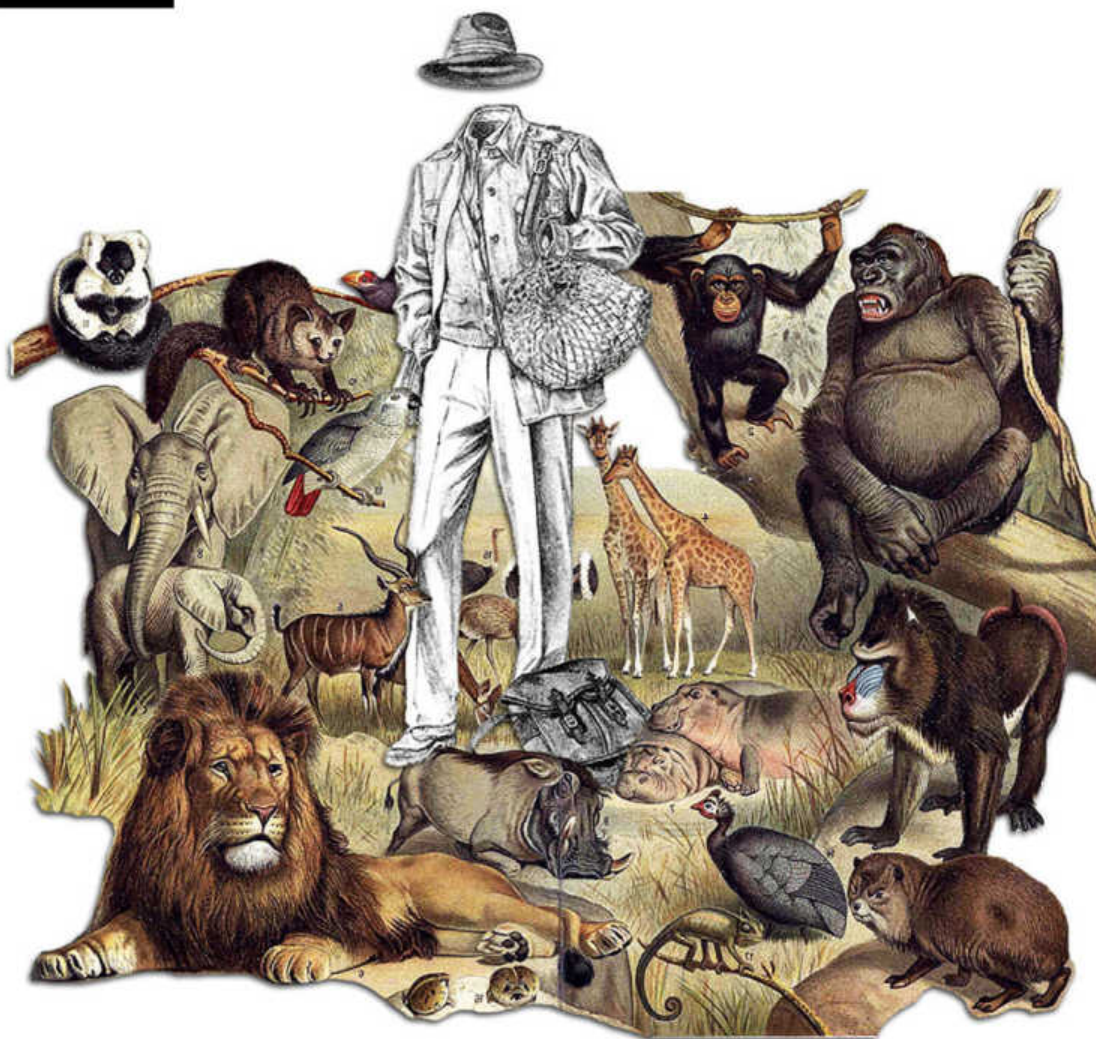
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exposed

I Got Naked with Finns.

One summer a few years ago, I found myself traveling alone in Finland. Having spent several days in Helsinki, I wanted to visit the country's islands, so I emailed a local acquaintance who e-introduced me to Milla, her islander friend. Milla sent me a handful of tips, capped with an offer: "I can take you overnight to our little getaway if it is not too much hassle." *Surely she's just being polite*, I thought. But as the Finnish proverb goes, "Take a man by his words and a bull by its horns." I accepted.

From Helsinki, I joined Milla and her friends on a motorboat down the southern coast of the Gulf of Finland to the private island where she lives. We foraged for blueberries,

then snacked on *salmiakki* (intensely salty licorice, a local delicacy) as we talked into the night. The next morning, we rose early to sit, nude, in her waterfront sauna.

I soon learned that this fast-friends experience was a microcosm of Finland's overall welcoming vibe. The country is the birthplace of the first Restaurant Day, a movement that encourages chefs and home cooks to host dinner parties for strangers. (The phenomenon has since expanded to 73 countries and spawned a number of copycat services.) It's home to Day With a Local Helsinki, which provides one-on-one tours, and to the Helsinki Helpers, neon-vested tour advisors who roam the city, offering tips in 11 languages. And then there are those famed public saunas, where even the most reserved Finns are likely to reveal themselves. —CHRISTINE AJUDUA

pro tips

How to Ditch the Single Supplement

1

SAFARIS

In Tanzania, the Four Seasons Safari Lodge Serengeti recently introduced a Lone Ranger package that includes walking safaris and game drives with other solo travelers. At their lodges all over Africa, Singita waives supplements for single travelers.

2

OUTFITTERS

With 50 no-supplement tours and perks like roommate matching, Overseas Adventure Travel is so good at solo travel that 40 percent of guests come alone. Meanwhile, the UK outfitter Solos Holidays just launched Solos Vacations in the U.S. (check out their 120-day around-the-world tour).

3

CRUISES

Norwegian was the first line in the industry to offer studios and social lounges designed for solo guests without charging extra fees. Now, small-ship river-cruise lines such as Viking and AmaWaterways have also joined the club.



What kind of solo traveler are you? Take the quiz at afar.com/lonewolf.

a little advice

HOP ON THE BUS.

ON PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION most people will be sitting in silence, which makes me feel like I'm not alone. You'll observe parts of culture that you might not otherwise see. ON A TOKYO TRAIN I discovered that people of all ages & genders carry lunch to work in plastic shopping bags with logos on them. A RIDE ON THE SUBWAY

in MILAN proved that men wear fierce amounts of cologne.

—JULIA BAINBRIDGE,
CREATOR OF THE NEW
LONELY HOUR PODCAST



where to dig deep

Farm stays are not the easiest vacations, with their early mornings and physical demands. But learn to drive a tractor, forage for mushrooms, or care for sheep, and you're instantly immersed in local life.

—CELINE KAGAN, A WRITER WHO FINDS HER FARMS VIA HELPX.NET

no, señor

I Stayed Single in South America.

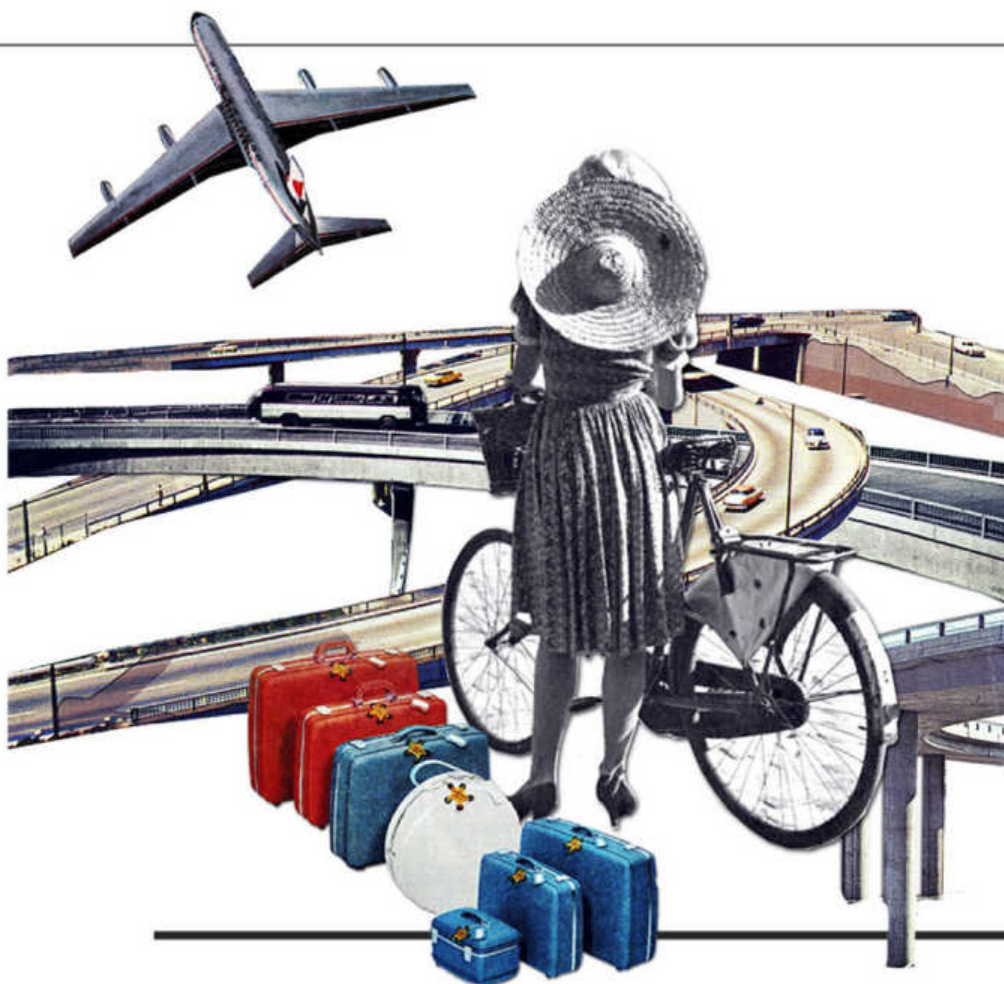
As a woman traveling alone in South America, I was prepared for *piropos*—compliments that trail a woman like an all-male chorus through machismo country. “Marry me!” went the refrain. My comeback, learned from a friend in Senegal: “Thank you, sir, but I already have five husbands.”

But what could prepare a woman for the tour guide who corners her with serenades? Or the policeman who takes the report on her stolen wallet: “Name? Birthdate? Most important: single or married?” He detained me for hours, investigating my interest in Argentinean men and salsa dancing.

Fortunately, being a solo woman traveler also granted me access to experiences I couldn't have had otherwise. When I was stranded in Ica, Peru, a family took me in like a long-lost daughter. Another time, in Cusco, a group of local women invited me to salsa. “We never talk to foreigners,” they said. But I was on my own, unintimidating. It was my first girls' night out, and with a group of new girlfriends surrounding me and showing me new steps, I was able to let my guard down and have fun. Sure, the men still asked me to dance, but I was ready: “*Gracias, señor, pero ya tengo cinco esposos.*” —ANNA VODICKA

pro tip
**How to Be
 a Hermit
 for 24 Hours**

Eremito, a 14th-century residence turned sustainable solo retreat in central Italy, offers extreme travel for the soul. Amidst some 7,000 acres on an Umbrian hillside, the lodging has 14 stone-walled rooms that are defined by what they lack: TV, Internet, phone service, and double occupancy. Dreamed up by fashion designer and hotelier Marcello Murzilli, the hotel is part monastic retreat (daily meditation sessions and Gregorian chants) and part aesthete's delight (chairs cut from stone, elegant cave pools). Keep in mind that Eremito (meaning "hermit,") takes its name literally. Inspired by ancient monasteries nearby, the hotel asks that you eat its candlelit organic vegetarian dinners in total silence.



pro tip
How to Travel Like a Lady

Traveling alone as a woman should be empowering, not a safety hazard. Nowadays, many places around the world are friendly toward single travelers of all genders, but there are some clear winners when it comes to female globetrotters.

1

REYKJAVIK

Possibly the most female-friendly country in the world, Iceland prides itself on gender equality, having elected the world's first openly lesbian prime minister, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir (who stepped down in 2013). Stay at the chic 101 Hotel, home to Kitchen & Wine restaurant, which serves Icelandic bistro fare. *From \$308.*

2

BERLIN

The women of Berlin have no problem showing their strength: Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has been called the most powerful woman on the planet, and the city is home to an all-female fight club (not that we suggest you join). Sleep at Artemisia, a hotel with a women-only floor near Berlin's Kurfürstendamm street. *From \$55.*

3

LONDON

Cosmopolitan, easy to navigate, and egalitarian—what's not to love? After a late night, call on the Pink Ladies, a car service whose female drivers will walk you to your door. (It's members-only, but you can join online for \$15.) At the Dukes Hotel, the Duchess service includes fresh flowers, chocolates, and an all-female staff. *From \$487.*

4

MELBOURNE

First, it ranks as one of the safest cities in the world. Mix in 24-hour public transportation, a thriving art scene, and companies like Female Friendly, which anoints businesses popular among local women, and you've got a solo slam dunk. The Ovolo Laneways hotel gets the company's seal of approval. *From \$214.*

THE BEST MEMORIES ARE RARELY PLANNED



They usually come from the little, unexpected wows. Like discovering a hidden, local bistro. Or meeting the family behind the winery during our tasting. Or even a crazy photo op at the perfect moment. That's where memories are made. And that's what we do best.

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#THEWORLDCALLS

lose your phone

I Failed to Find Friends with a Friend-Finding App.

Until recently, traveling alone was largely unpredictable. For every *Eat Pray Love* moment, there were untold hours of wasted time, sketchy situations, and missed opportunities. But now a growing suite of apps aims to connect like-minded single trekkers for everything from local music to unexplored cuisine. And I'm on a mission to try them all (OK, three) on a short trip to the Philippines.

On a three-hour layover at Tokyo's Narita airport, I start with Wander, an app that connects solo travelers to one another by matching interests ("I like pirates, British comedy, and baseball"). I find a chat buddy, but he's hundreds of miles away in Seoul. After a confusing 15-minute conversation where he either propositioned me or invited me for dinner (his English wasn't stellar and my Korean is abysmal) I close the app and head for the nearest airport bar.

Five hours later I touch down in Manila and fire up Banjo, an app geared toward meeting people at live events and local spots.

I find a new Filipino restaurant in the Fort—one of Manila's glitzy shopping areas—and down a plate of the best pork *sisig* I've ever tasted. Yet I'm still flying solo.

"So... why don't you just use Tinder?" Post-lunch, I'm texting with one of my friends who meets people overseas using the megapopular dating app. And it's a good point! Most of my single friends who travel solo use a mix of Tinder and Facebook to find new friends while traveling. But I just can't get over the lurid subtext—plus, I'm married.

Twenty-four hours later, I'm at Busuanga Bay Lodge on Busuanga, an island 185 miles south of Manila. I try to open Outbound, an app for outdoor-minded folks. But cell reception is virtually nonexistent here, and Wi-Fi is slower than a narcoleptic three-toed sloth.

Frustrated, I head to the hotel bar, order a rum punch and start chatting with Ashley and Mike, a filmmaker and an accountant from Zambia. We spend the day together eating, drinking, and playing volleyball. After I dive for the ball and a jagged piece of coral opens up a nine-inch gash on my shin, I say goodbye before hobbling off to find a first aid kit. Will I ever talk to them again? I hope so. Because, I realize as I check the Wi-Fi again, sometimes it's the limitations of technology that get us to the places we truly want to go. —DANIEL DUMAS



a little advice

GET OUTSIDE and BE in NATURE.

LISTENING to your
BOOTS PADDING ALONG THE
TRAILS IS ODDLY COMFORTING
—THE RHYTHM GIVES you A
SENSE of PURPOSE.
WHILE HIKING in PATAGONIA
I FOUND THAT **SOUND**
PROVIDED SO MUCH
SERENITY.

—JULIETTE
SAN FILLIPO,
AFAR ASSOCIATE
MARKETING
MANAGER



love your phone **I Met My Best Friends on Instagram.**

In 2014, Nastasia Wong was looking for a travel fantasy. Injured while working as a nurse, she was confined to bed rest, and boredom was setting in. “I needed a project, and I figured, ‘I love travel, and I love photography, so let me see if there’s a female community online that I can live through,’” she says. “But all I found were fashion and beauty blogs. So I decided to create my own.”

Nastasia started by uploading her own photos from previous trips to Instagram, with the hashtag #dametraveler, and

then began posting photos submitted by other women traveling solo. As stories and positive feedback started to flood in, she created the website Dame Traveler to profile women and their adventures. Blown away by the response, she quit her job last spring to travel and blog full-time. Now this online community has morphed into an offline one.

“I’ve heard lots of stories of women connecting with each other to travel together or collaborate on projects,” she says. “When I travel and share my photos, people around the world reach out to say, ‘I’m nearby—let’s grab a coffee.’”

This March 6–10, that community is meeting, officially, in real life: Nastasia is running her first Instameet in Cuba in partnership with Conscious Cuba. Who’s invited? Only 137,000 of her best Instagram friends.

—GEORGIA FREEDMAN

parent trap **I Left My Family for a Weekend.**

One mom I know finds it at Target, when her husband’s home with the kids. That feeling of freedom that, for parents, is fleeting; when you can ponder subjects other than keeping those little people alive.

I had a weekend. My wife and son were across the country. I was on the road by 5 a.m., and at the Yosemite campground before 9. I started on the trail. I watched birds. I got a little lost. Around a bend, El Capitan appeared, and I stopped and ate my lunch. On the way back, I found a pool of clear, frigid water. I took off my clothes and soaked in it.

Parents, don’t squander your moments of freedom. They frown on public nudity at Target.

—JEREMY SAUM

business + leisure = bleisure

**I always find some time alone,
even if it’s just for an hour.
While in Paris recently, I strolled the
Seine before an important meeting.
Taking time to observe and
reflect allowed me to talk about
business *and* about what’s
happening in France right now.**

—JOE DIAZ, AFAR COFOUNDER



a little advice

SEE A **LOCAL BAND**
PERFORM. PEOPLE *in*
THE CROWD
ARE LIKELY to
BE HAVING FUN &
TIPSY—THAT IS,
READY to MAKE
NEW FRIENDS.

—ANDREW
RICHDALE,
AFAR SENIOR
EDITOR



table for one

Are We Really Ready for Eenmaal?

We've all been there: sitting at a restaurant alone, feeling out of place. "To be alone in a restaurant often looks and feels somewhat sad," says Marina van Goor, founder of Amsterdam's design firm MVGCA. "I wanted to create an attractive place where eating out alone is accepted and even cool." So she launched Eenmaal, the world's first pop-up restaurant for solo diners, which serves seasonal four-course menus with natural wine pairings (all for about \$40). Here, at your own personal

table, there's no chance of being pressured into ordering something you don't want—or sharing something you *do* want—and, as van Goor says, "Since everybody sits alone, it is not awkward." On the flip side, you can forget about eavesdropping for entertainment, and as much as we appreciate the notebooks they provide for doodling, the desklike tables might remind you of grade school (or worse, the office). Still, almost every Eenmaal pop-up thus far—in Amsterdam, Antwerp, and London—has sold out, and permanent locations in Asia and the United States may be on the horizon. Van Goor even teamed up with France's Bauchet champagne house to release single-serve bottles of bubbly to celebrate solo "moments of disconnection." —CHRISTINE AJUDUA



Take this inspiration and plan your next—or maybe first?—solo trip at afar.com/solo.

take a break

I Meditated on the Plains of Kansas.

When the walls of day-to-day life feel like they're closing in on me, I head to a place where my mind has space to unwind. For me that's the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas. It may appear monotonous and monochromatic from a distance, but if you hike in and stand quietly, its colors, smells, and sounds seep into your consciousness: the gentle rustle of the ocean of grass and the hum of bees in the violet wildflowers; the songs of meadowlarks that daintily perch on the slenderest of twigs; the aroma of hot earth, dry grass, bee balm, and clover.

On one solitary winter day, I grew so contemplative, hearing only the wind and the crunch of my boots on the frozen ground, I didn't even notice I had wandered perilously close to the preserve's resident bison herd. They were tolerant, though, and mellow, giving me the merest glance and returning to their bison business. It was just me. Nothing to worry about. —SOPHIA DEMBLING

SPOTLIGHT ON CHARLESTON'S COCKTAIL SCENE

Mixologists have been shaking things up in Charleston lately. And one of the most notable is **Craig Nelson, owner of the craft cocktail bar Proof** and featured mixologist at the Evenings AFAR event in New York. A proud born-and-bred Charlestonian, he often spent time at his grandmother's liquor store when school was out. **We chatted with Nelson to learn more about what makes Charleston the place for innovative cocktails and local craft beers, all infused with the spirit of the South.** He shares his take—along with a favorite recipe below.

insider's take



Q: What makes Charleston's cocktail scene stand out?

A: "The thing that ties it together is the whiskey program. We're into our bourbon! Besides, there's a warm Southern hospitality that comes naturally for us locals, and it's just something that catches on and spreads."

Q: What locally made ingredients can we find on cocktail menus around town?

A: "We have some pretty amazing products, such as Jack Rudy tonic, grenadine, and bourbon-soaked cherries (which are mind-blowing!)."

Q: Do you have a favorite Southern cocktail recipe?

A: "The Knuckleball reminds me of my childhood here in Charleston, going to baseball games. My grandfather used to put peanuts in his cola bottle and share it with me. He may have had a little 'brown water' on his lips because I remember that smell on the cola bottleneck...so sweet and rich."



- 2 oz. high-proof bourbon
- 1 oz. Mexican Coke reduction (slowly reduce by half and let cool)
- 2 dashes of Bittercube orange bitters

Shake and serve up in your favorite cocktail glass.

Add 5 or 6 pickled peanuts and eat one with every sip for a tart and spicy balance.

"This is a very Southern drink that I created for our menu at Proof. I use a high-proof bourbon, Mexican Coca Cola reduction, orange bitters, and pickled boiled peanuts.

We boil the peanuts at Proof, shell them, and then make a pickling solution of sugar, salt, pickling spice, red and black pepper. We pour that right on top of the cold legumes and then let it chill.

The result is a cross between a whiskey and Coke, peanuts and Coke, and a Manhattan. The Coca Cola reduction is very amaro/sweet vermouth like. It encapsulates Charleston's unique flavor."

 CHECK OUT MORE AT #EVENINGSAFAR



the knuckleball

Charleston
SOUTH CAROLINA

Discover more about Charleston's cocktail culture at refreshingcharleston.com.



pro tip
How to
(Happily)
Drink
Alone

Tristan Willey, of Brooklyn's Long Island Bar, is as well versed in the art of conversation as he is in the art of cocktail making. So who better to advise travelers on the fine art of drinking solo?

"Avoid opening lines. It makes for a better interaction. One of the best parts about being alone is that you're not forced to interact, and you can wait for the right moment to strike up a conversation. The world gets to revolve around you for a little bit when you're sitting by yourself at the bar, and usually a natural entry point comes along. You shouldn't force it.

"In New York, so many travelers have

this idea of what the city should be like. They try to react to that idea instead of taking the time to absorb the scene of the individual bar. So it's really wonderful when you have someone come in alone and just enjoy where they're at for a bit and try to understand it for what it is.

"When I travel, I go to local bars, because you get to see people who are living nearby, drinking casually. You get to know the community so much better when you're not at the kind of destination bar that people treat as an event. In New York, my favorites are Brooklyn Inn in Boerum Hill and Sunny's in Red Hook.

"Finding places like those is hard, though. I tend to start with a bar that's stuck in the middle of a neighborhood. All the bartenders you're talking to live nearby. Order a pint of beer, talk with them. Ask them where they drink, and take their advice." —AS TOLD

TO SARAH PURKRABEK

your moment of zen

I Crashed a Japanese Karaoke Party.

I recently spent six days buzzing through Tokyo, population 13 million. And on the seventh day, I needed rest. Unconstrained by anyone else's schedule, I booked a ticket

to Hakone, a village of *onsen* (natural hot springs) resorts near Mount Fuji.

The weird part of slowing down in Japan: It happens fast. Over the course of an hour, I gazed out a train window as the city faded to fog-cloaked trees—like those in the Pacific Northwest, but with the drama turned up.

When I arrived, I hiked. I sipped matcha. I tied on a traditional *yukata* (robe), untied it, and slipped into the steaming baths. Fifteen

minutes in, my shoulders sat lower.

The silence verged on eerie until a pack of sloshed businessmen killed the mood. *White boy, where are you from?* Fast-forward three hours and I'm sloshed, too, on sake, and singing the Beatles at their corporate karaoke party in the resort's basement. Everyone cheered as though I were Lennon reincarnated.

I hadn't found the idle heart rate I came for, but I felt damn content. —ANDREW RICHDALE

I ALWAYS
TAKE SOME KIND OF CLASS
MAKING in FRANCE—

-AISLYN GREENE,
AFAR ASSOCIATE EDITOR



I Drove the Road to Reinvention.

I learned many things during those two weeks. Like that you have to pay a premium to rent a car if you're under 25, which might wipe out much of your savings and require a humbling call home. Or that if you don't make reservations in high season, your car may be the only vacant room for many miles. I learned that camping alone in a deserted campground by the Pacific ocean *sounds* romantic, but that if you let your mind wander back to the

There were also a thousand tiny freedoms: Blackberry milk shakes for dinner. Running on cold sand as the sun began to warm the world. Turning down a dirt road just because I had to know what was at the end. Writing for hours, the way I did as a kid. I discovered that as an adult my time was my own to shape, stretch, fill, and savor, and I reveled in it.

A solo road trip provides you with total car DJ rights, yes, but also time to realize that maybe you want to go back to school for journalism (which is what I eventually did). I by no means had it all figured out when I crossed the border into Washington, but I did, finally, have a sense of direction. —AISLYN GREENE





THE PATH TO PEACE

CAN A HIKE
THROUGH THE
HAUNTED BEAUTY OF
THE BALKANS
HEAL THE WOUNDS
OF WAR?

BY DAVID FARLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM GOLFER



AFTER TWO FULL DAYS of trekking through flat landscapes, Duško and I had just conquered our first hill. And he wasn't taking it too well. I stood at the top of the grade on the lonely road, taking in the view and waiting for my walking companion to catch

up. The Danube River's twists and turns cut through the flat, swampy countryside; hops and wheat fields, punctuated by the occasional Croatian village, spread out to the horizon. On the other side of the river, where we'd just come from, was Serbia. "Can we just hitchhike, please?" he yelled up to me.

"No!" I yelled back. "I told you. We're walking the entire thing. And you'll like it!"

It felt like we were an old married couple. Yet we'd known each other only a few days. I was grumpy from the day's long walk with the late spring sun pounding down on us. We had 15 miles more to go, and, truth be told, fantasies of being miraculously beamed to my next hotel bed began infiltrating my thoughts. A few minutes later, a car zoomed past us, then its brake lights suddenly flashed, and it backed up in our direction. The passenger window came down, and a guy in his early 40s, about the same age as Duško and me, leaned out. "Want a ride?"

Once in the car, I noticed the sides of the driver's head were shaved, and crooked scars ran from his temples to his ears. A cross and a plastic 100-dollar bill dangled from his rearview mirror. As he and Duško chatted, my mind trailed off, wondering if our miracle worker with Croatian license plates on his car had fought against the Serbs 20 years ago, and if he could tell that Duško was Serbian—there isn't a huge difference in the languages that Serbs and Croatians speak. Before I could think too much about it, the car stopped in front of our pension in the village of Zlatna Greda, which marked about the halfway point of our walk from northwestern Serbia into eastern Croatia.

We were hiking the Via Pacis Pannoniae—*Panonski Put Mira* in both Serbian and Croatian, or the Pannonian Peace Trail in English. The 55-mile network of dirt and paved roads connects the Serbian region of Vojvodina and the Croatian region of Slavonia, and was established



Liberland is a patch of no-man's-land between Serbia and Croatia, but it has its own flag.



Mirko and Helena Aleksander, above left, hosted writer David Farley in Bilje, Croatia. The last leg of the walk took Farley to Osijek, the Croatian city where the Peace Trail ends.



An old Roma house in Bački Monoštor, Serbia, above left, is a typical sight along the Pannonian Peace Trail, cofounded by Duško Medić, above right. Other scenes along the Peace Trail, below, include a rustic Serbian guesthouse and beekeepers gathering honey.



to instill a sense of reconciliation between the two countries. Croatia and Serbia were once united under the umbrella of Yugoslavia, along with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Macedonia. Until the breakup of Yugoslavia and the rise of nationalism in the early 1990s, there had been no border between Croatia and Serbia, and the main distinction between peoples was their faith: Croats were mostly Catholic, Serbs mostly Christian Orthodox.

When I heard about the Peace Trail, I sent an email through its website and received a response from Duško Medić (pronounced DOOSH-koh MED-eech), the trail's founder. He not only helped me plan my trip, he also asked if he could join me on my walk. Duško, who lives in Novi Sad in Serbia, explained that he hatched the idea for the trail in 2005, a decade after 1991–1995 Croatian War of Independence, in hopes of bridging the divide between the two Balkan countries, which share a 195-mile border, including 150 miles of the Danube River.

I have to admit, I was skeptical that a hiking trail could induce common understanding between two countries that had been killing each other, amassing an estimated 20,000 fatalities, just 20 years ago. But I was intrigued: What if, even on a micro level, it actually worked?

BEFORE DUŠKO AND I SET OFF ON OUR

walk last May, we met his project partner, Gojko Mišković, for coffee in Sombor, a leafy low-rise town near the eastern and northern end of the trail in a corner of the country where Serbia, Hungary, and Croatia come together. Duško, a journalist and environmentalist who had taken part in the little-known Serbian antiwar movement, secured funding for the trail from USAID and Catholic Relief Services, but he and Gojko had to overcome local politics and bureaucracy as well as remnants of Serbian nationalism and Croatian wariness. "Everything that comes from Serbia since the war is suspect," Gojko said. "Our main challenge was winning the support and trust of the Croats, and we did that."

With Sombor's massive, neoclassical town hall looming behind us, Duško and I marched out of town. As we turned onto a country road, Duško informed me we'd be deviating from the trail a bit. He wanted to swing a few miles southward to Apatin, where he was born. "I originally wanted the trail to go through my hometown," he said, as we turned to walk down an abandoned railway line flanked by hops fields. "But the mayor at that time was a big

Serb nationalist and wanted nothing to do with the Peace Trail."

When the train tracks disappeared into thickets of tall weeds and tree branches, Duško steered me through a dirt field so vast it gave me vertigo. About three hours later, we dragged ourselves into Apatin, our mouths dry as the dust we had traipsed through. We had packed no water, just a bottle of vodka from one of Duško's friends, and I discouraged Duško from breaking it out. Our reward for reaching this Danube town of about 17,000 people was a joyous greeting from Duško's parents, Mira and Mirko, some cold, locally made Jelen beers, and several shots of Mirko's homemade *rakia*, the stomach-melting brandy that seems to fuel the Balkans.

After a shower and a brief rest, I wandered into the living room to find a gaggle of people sitting around a table. Unbeknownst to me, it

was Duško's father's birthday, and an epic meal was underway: chicken schnitzel, roasted pork, stewed lamb shoulder, *sarma*—a Turkish dish, minced meat stuffed into sour cabbage leaves—and plenty of *rakia*. Anytime my glass was half empty, Mirko topped it off.

The man sitting next to me, a gaunt fellow with sunken cheeks, struck up a conversation. Like me, he had lived in Prague, and we chatted in Czech. It turned out he was originally from Bosnia and in the mid-'90s had spent more time in a Bosnian refugee camp than he cared to remember. "Will there be lasting peace in the region, now that Croatia is in the European Union and Serbia is on the road to membership?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said. "But war seems to erupt here every 50 years." He looked deep into my eyes, tapped his index finger on his temple and said, "It's how we think."





Just then, Duško interrupted us to tell me every partygoer's ethnic origin. I had assumed most people in the room were Serbian, but the crowd also included a Slovak, a German-Slovak, a Croat, a Croat-Serb, a Croat-Hungarian, a Bosnian, and me, an American. About every half hour someone would refill everyone's rakia glass and shout, "*Živeli*"—"to life." We'd clink our glasses and then, all together, drink. I realized my thinking might be naïve, but with so much mirth in the room, it was hard to imagine the hateful slaughter of two decades past.

A couple of hours later, Duško and I dropped by his friend's house, where another party was in full swing. While fielding questions from Duško's curious acquaintances, I sensed some vague hostility coming my way from one chisel-jawed fellow. The next day, Duško explained that the man had served in the Serbian army in the early '90s and participated in the 87-day siege of Vukovar. In 1991, under orders from Slobodan Milošević, 36,000 Yugoslav (mostly Serb) forces "liberated" the Serbs living in that Croatian city, killing hundreds of Croatian

civilians and troops and displacing another 31,000 residents. The ex-soldier was clearly ill at ease in the presence of someone from the United States—which led the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia—who had come as a journalist to write about the Peace Trail.

Later that night, after the parties, while I was trying to get some sleep before the next day's hike, my door suddenly burst open. "David?" It was Mira, Duško's mom. "*Schläfst du?*" she called out in German: "Are you asleep?" I grunted an acknowledgment that I was conscious. "*Komme*," she said, and walked out of the room. When I arrived in the kitchen, two middle-aged women, neighbors I assumed, were sitting at the table with Mira. I was introduced as "the journalist from New York!" and took a seat in front of a beer and a glass of rakia. Aside from the stilted German that Mira and I spoke, there was no common language between us, but I felt as if I'd long been part of the clan and had just returned from an extended trip. The next morning, before Duško and I set out, I gave Mira and

Mirko lengthy hugs, and Mirko gave me a bottle of rakia, naturally.

The Balkan Peninsula takes its name from the mountain range that stretches from Serbia to the Black Sea, but *Balkan* is commonly believed to derive from the Turkish words for honey (*bal*) and blood (*kan*). In less than 24 hours, I'd experienced both—the hot blood of a possible war criminal and the honey of unconditional love from a circle of family and friends.

THE ROUTE TO our next stop, Bački Monoštor, skirted the Danube River and some of its man-made canals. As we passed the periphery of a protected natural reserve, Duško identified the trees—"there's an oak, there's a beech"—and even pulled an acacia flower from a branch and ate it, saying, "Sweet. Consider that my dessert."

About halfway along our 12-mile walk, we found ourselves across the river from what might be the site of the next Balkan conflict.



In April 2015, a libertarian-leaning Czech politician named Vít Jedlička planted a flag on a 2.7-square-mile patch of land that is considered *terra nullius*, nobody's land, due to an ongoing disagreement between Croatia and Serbia. He declared that he was the president of the world's newest nation, Liberland. But a month earlier, Matthew Phillips, an Australian who is the leader of his own micronation in Antarctica, had apparently staked his claim to the very same area and named it the Autonomous Region of Pannonia (the ancient Roman word for this area). In response to Jedlička's interloping, Phillips asked him to vacate the territory, and then posted on the Facebook page of his "nation" the following message: "The time given to Liberland in the ultimatum has expired. War will be declared in about one week." Despite the absurdity of the dispute, both Croatia and Serbia stationed police at the borders near Liberland to prevent anyone from entering the territory of the would-be new nation. The tensions paled in comparison to the Syrian migrant crisis that arrived that

autumn, severely straining the fragile relations between Croatia and Serbia, but they showed that even the smallest ripples can threaten to become waves in the tumultuous region.

As we approached Bački Monoštor, we were greeted by plumes of smoke rising from a junk fire. At the main intersection in the center of town, old women clad in layers of dark-hued gowns, babushka scarves wrapped over their heads, pedaled by on bikes in one direction. A horse pulled a carriage piled with logs in the other. The town's 4,000 inhabitants are mostly Šokci—people of Croatian descent living in Serbia who don't identify as Croatian, as if the puzzle of Balkan ethnicity wasn't complex enough already.

After our overnight in Bački Monoštor, we followed a long and winding paved road west to the Danube. "This is it," Duško said. Once we walked across the bridge over the river, we'd be in Croatia. Before the breakup of Yugoslavia, many people had told me, crossing the Danube was simply crossing a river. Now it was different. The Croatian border guard stamped my

U.S. passport freely, no questions asked. When Duško laid down his Serbian passport, and the guard looked up to study his face, it was clear that questions were coming.

What was our reason for coming to Croatia? What did we each do for a living? What is the address of where we'd be staying? How long would we be here?

Duško responded at length. I couldn't understand everything he was saying, but I could make out that he was telling her about the Peace Trail. Finally, exasperated, she waved us through. Once we cleared the border and started trudging up the hill that would soon have Duško suggesting we hitchhike, he told me he had expected to be harassed and had been intentionally verbose so the guard would get impatient and just stamp his passport and shoo us away.

After our hike to the village of Zlatna Greda became the miraculous car ride, Duško and I spent the evening feasting on Croatian prosciutto from the Dalmatian coast, soft country bread, local cheese, and several bottles of the

region's exceptional red wine.

The next morning's walk took us out of Zlatna Greda's jumble of mostly abandoned 19th-century buildings, through fields with herds of deer and the occasional wild boar, and past Tikveš, a 19th-century castle where Marshal Josip Broz Tito often stayed during his 37-year reign as Yugoslavia's uniter-in-chief and where Serbia's president, Slobodan Milošević, and his Croatian counterpart, Franjo Tuđman, were reported to have met to discuss the potential partitioning of Bosnia-Herzegovina. After a few twists and turns, we were walking on an

elevated path that cut right through the swampy landscape of Kopački Rit, one of the largest wetlands in Europe. Large purple herons and white storks sailed overhead. The next 15 miles to our penultimate destination, Bilje, felt twice that long in the scorching heat. By the time we limped into town, I was walking about 100 feet in front of Duško, who had nearly petered out a couple of miles back.

We randomly chose to stay at Pension Aleksander, a comfortable place run by a couple, Helena and Mirko Aleksander, and their two daughters, one a teenager, the

other in her early 20s. Within a few minutes of checking in, we were sitting in the leafy back garden, talking and, of course, sipping Mirko's homemade rakia. We were idly chitchatting, in both English and Croatian/Serbian, when I asked what I thought was an innocent question: "Are you originally from Bilje?"

Helena shook her head from side to side and said they'd only lived here for 10 years. Before that, they lived in Istria, in northwest Croatia.

"Oh. So where are you originally from?" I asked.

There was a pause, a stillness in the air. Helena's eyes darted nervously around. She gave Duško a long glance, then stared down at the table full of rakia glasses and said, "Vukovar."

Silence overcame the four of us until Helena continued. "We fled during the war, but most of our extended family were all killed. Our home was completely destroyed. Mirko lost 80 percent of his ability to hear."

I asked if they'd been back to Vukovar since. Helena shook her head and looked away, holding back tears. Then she looked at Duško. "I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable. I know you're Serbian. But you can't blame ordinary people," she said, folding her arms. "It's people at the top who make the decisions that are to blame. There comes a time when you have to forgive, and we've done that."

The conversation stopped there, but soon more rakia was poured, and talk resumed, shifting to what one does for fun in Bilje.

The next morning, Duško and I sat around the breakfast table with Helena, Mirko, and their daughter Anita. Mirko busted out his electric guitar and played some blues riffs. He handed it to me and I started strumming the only song that came to mind, "Whole Lotta Love." Everyone watched and clapped along as I played, and for a moment at least, we were all united under the flag of Led Zeppelin.

I said goodbye to the Aleksanders, and to Duško, who needed to get back to Novi Sad, and set off by myself to walk the final five miles to Osijek, the end of the trail. I crossed over the Drava River on a bridge that replaced the one locals destroyed in 1991 to prevent the Serbian soldiers from encroaching further. They had rebuilt the span, and it is now a small but essential link on the trail to peace. **A**

Contributing writer David Farley wrote about Varanasi, India, in the June-July 2014 issue of AFAR. Photographer Adam Golfer is profiled on page 22.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT THE BALKANS NOW

An expert in travel to Central and Eastern Europe shares his must-do experiences in five Balkan republics.

Travel to the Balkan region is looking way up since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, notes **Greg Tepper**, president of tour agency Exeter International (exeterinternational.com). Flight connections are good and getting better for Croatia and Slovenia, and **visa restrictions are minimal**. Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina were slower to rebuild after the war, but they have opened their borders. The best way to get around, he says, is to **hire a car and driver**.

CROATIA

Croatia has reemerged as a big-time vacation destination. Visitors can enjoy a **well-developed travel industry**, an improved highway system, a balance of luxurious hotels and homey accommodations, and a national cuisine similar to Italy's, with **excellent wine and fresh seafood**. Dubrovnik teems in the summer, so get off the beaten path and head to the sea. Visit such off-the-radar islands as Brac, Vis, and Mljet.

SERBIA

Add Serbia to a Balkan itinerary to get a vivid picture of the region's past—at the crossroads of the Ottoman, Hapsburg, and Russian empires—and an enticing glimpse of its future. **Belgrade**, the capital, is a lively, ever-changing city, buzzing with **nightclubs and cocktail bars**, film festivals, and sports events. Not far from Novi Sad, the second largest city, is Čenej, a settlement where traditional farms remain unchanged from the 17th century.

SLOVENIA

With every passing year, more fans gravitate to Slovenia, a small country on the northwest border of Croatia. For **skiing, snowboarding, hiking, and rafting**, active travelers should visit **the Julian Alps**, home to Lake Bled and Mount Triglav (the nation's highest peak), as well as the Kamnik-Savinja Alps and the Karavanke and Pohorje mountain ranges.


MONTENEGRO

Tiny Montenegro, thanks largely to foreign investment, now offers some **superb accommodations** on the western coast, including the Aman Sveti Stefan and the Regent Porto Montenegro. The capital, Podgorica, and the former royal capital, Cetinje, are the cultural centers, but the country offers great variety in its landscape—from tall mountain peaks and a low coastal plain to **the fjord-studded Bay of Kotor**—and a unique, hybrid cuisine influenced by Italy, Croatia, Hungary, and the eastern Mediterranean.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

This mountainous, heavily forested Balkan state was the physical center of Yugoslavia. It is a microcosm of the former federation's geography, its **wildly varying climate** (from warm-and-dry Mediterranean to cold-and-continental alpine), and its demographics (one of the most **ethnically mixed** of all of the former republics). Bosnians are famous for their **sense for humor**, and because the country has yet to find its place on the wish lists of travelers to southeastern Europe, it's easy to engage in unadulterated local cultural experiences such as the complicated process of preparing robust, foamy Bosnian coffee.





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PAL

**When you're alone in Tokyo and
you need someone to talk to, do as
the locals do: Rent a friend.**

by **Chris Colin**
photographs by **Landon Nordeman**

IT'S MUGGY AND I'M CONFUSED.

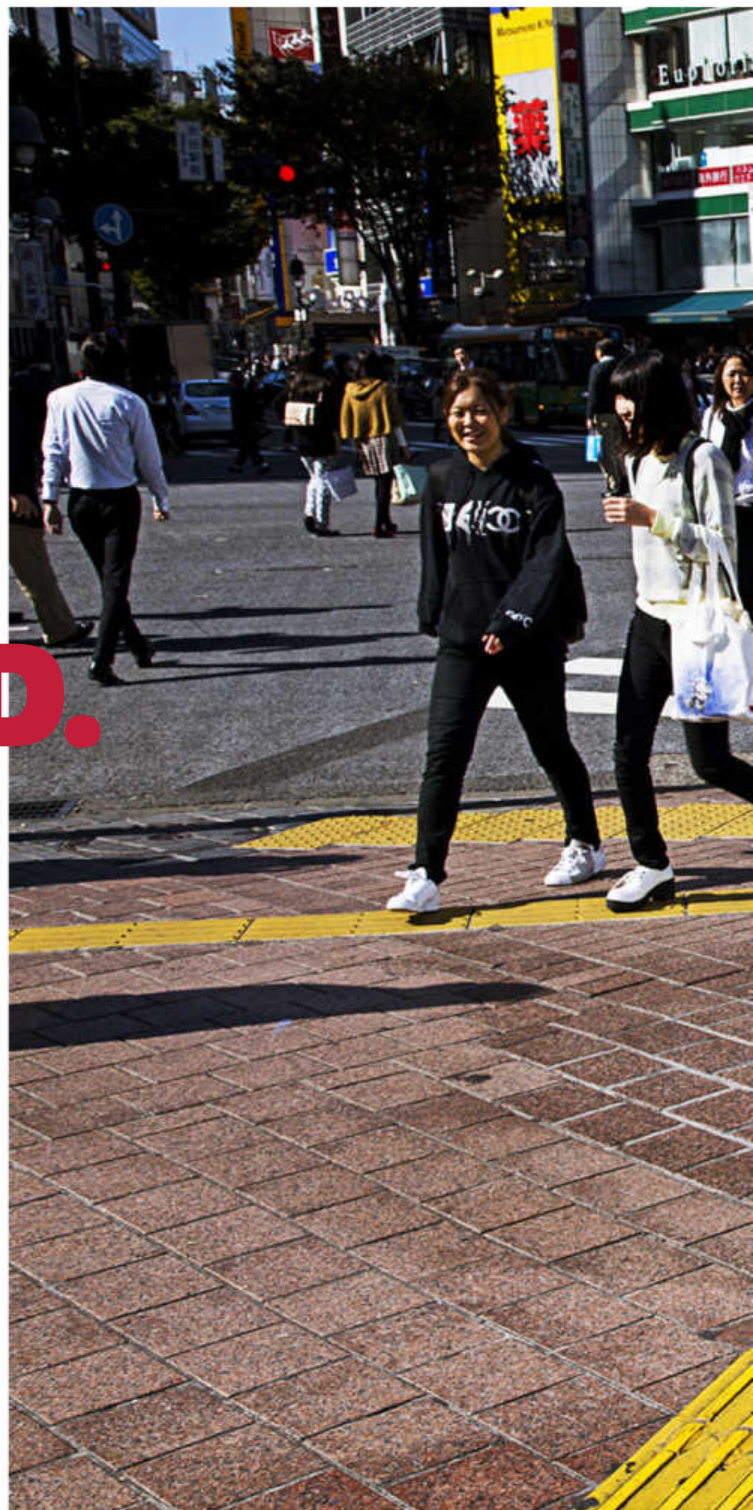
I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHERE I AM, THOUGH IT WAS ONLY a short walk from my Airbnb studio to this little curry place. I don't understand the lunch menu, or even if it is a lunch menu. Could be a religious tract or a laminated ransom note. I'm new in Tokyo, and sweaty, and jet-lagged. But I am entirely at ease. I owe this to my friend Miyabi. She's one of those reassuring presences, warm and eternally nodding and unfailingly loyal, like she will never leave my side. At least not for another 90 minutes, which is how much of her friendship I've paid for.

Miyabi isn't a prostitute, or an escort or an actor or a therapist. Or maybe she's a little of each. For the past five years she has been a professional rent-a-friend, working for a company called Client Partners.

My lunch mate pokes daintily at her curry and speaks of the friends whose money came before mine. There was the head of a prominent company, rich and "very clever" but conversationally marooned at "hello." Discreetly and patiently, Miyabi helped draw other words out. There was the string of teenage girls struggling to navigate mystifying social dynamics; at their parents' request, Miyabi would show up and just be a friend. You know, a normal, companionable, 27-year-old friend. She has been paid to cry at funerals and swoon at weddings, lest there be shame over a paltry turnout. Last year, a high schooler hired her and 20 other women just long enough to snap one grinning, peace-sign-flashing, I-totally-have-friends Instagram photo.

When I learned that friendship is rentable in Tokyo, it merely seemed like more Japanese wackiness, in a subset I'd come to think of as interest-kitsch. Every day in Japan, it seems, some weird new appetite is identified and gratified. There are cats to rent, after all, used underwear to purchase, owls to pet at owl bars. Cuddle cafés exist for the uncuddled, goat cafés for the un-goated. Handsome men will wipe away the tears of stressed-out female office workers. All to say I expected something more or less goofy when I lined up several English-speaking rent-a-friends for my week in Tokyo. The agency Miyabi works for exists primarily for lonely locals, but the service struck me as well suited to a solo traveler, too, so I paid a translator to help with the arrangements. Maybe a more typical Japanese business would've bristled at this kind of intrusion from a foreigner. But the rent-a-friend world isn't typical, I would soon learn, and in some ways it wants to subvert all that is.

Contrived Instagram photos aside, Miyabi's career mostly comprises the



small, unremarkable acts of ordinary friendship: Shooting the breeze over dinner. Listening on a long walk. Speaking simple kindnesses on a simple drive to the client's parents' house, simply to pretend you two are in love and absolutely on the verge of getting married, so don't even worry, Mom and Dad.

As a girl, Miyabi longed to be a flight attendant—Continental, for some reason—and



MIYABI

Age 27

Rent-a-friend
jobs per
week on
average 15

**Most notable
assignment**
Fake fiancée

**Words
of wisdom**
“So many
people are good
at life online
or life at work,
but not real life.”

that tidy solicitousness still emanates. She wears a smart gray skirt and a gauzy beige blouse over which a sheet of impeccable hair drapes weightlessly. She doesn't care that I am peccable. She smiles when I smile, touches my arm to make a point. Her graciousness cloaks a demanding job. With an average of 15 gigs a week, Miyabi's hours are irregular and bleed from day into night. The daughter of a doctor and a nurse, she still struggles to convince her parents that her relatively new field is legitimate. The money is fine but not incredible; I'm paying her roughly \$115 for two hours, some percentage of which Client Part-

ners keeps. So why does she do it?

Miyabi puts down her chopsticks and explains: It helps people—real and lonesome people in need of, well, whatever ineffable thing friendship means to our species. “So many people are good at life online or life at work, but not real life,” she says, pantomiming someone staring at a phone. For such clients a dollop of emotional contact with a friendly



YUMI

Unique clients

A mystery writer who wanted someone to read his novel; a young man who wanted to talk with someone, over email, about his aging parents; a bride who needed someone to play the role of her sister at the wedding.

What most clients really need

Basic, uncomplicated companionship

person is powerful, she adds, even with a price tag attached.

So this isn't secretly about romance? I ask. Not at all, she replies. Two rules: no romance, no lending money. Also, be ready for all types of clients: Widowers who need someone to watch TV with. Shy guys who could use a dating coach. Shy gals longing for a shopping companion. And that one dude who just wanted a friend who'd do him the solid of waiting seven hours outside Nike to snag these fresh sneakers for him when they went on sale.

Then there are the fake boyfriends. At 35, "Hayato" had been facing

intense pressure to find a wife and start a family. But it wasn't happening, so he started a charade instead. A visit to his parents' home was coming up, and with Miyabi's help he concocted a whopper: that she was one of Hayato's employees at his company and they had fallen in love. The two hunkered down in cafés to practice. Biographical details were learned, romantic quirks rehearsed. (As long as she was



“
**With us,
people can
talk about
their
feelings
without
worrying
what
their real
friends think.**
”

telling lies, he decided some general flattery wouldn't hurt: *Hayato's so great and kind at the company, everyone there loves him.*)

The day of the visit came, and lo, the parents bought it. Soon the fake relationship fake-graduated to a fake engagement.

“It was embarrassing,” Miyabi told me about the lying. “But watching his parents feel good when I said these nice things about him—it's not all bad.” But all pretend-good things come to an end, and eventually a finale was written. In time, a heartbroken Hayato informed his parents that Miyabi loved her career more than she loved him—she'd transferred to a

different branch, and that was that.

After lunch we walk out into the afternoon, our friendship nearly done. We stroll north, toward the cartoonishly packed intersection near the Shibuya subway station. Smiling young people pop into department stores. Schoolchildren huddle and cackle and retreat to phones and then re-erupt. Every other shirt shouts a bright, nonsensical slogan—I'M JUST BEING EMO YESTERDAY—capitalist exuberance overpowering sense. The whole scene looks like a promotional video for Japan. I believe Miyabi when she says her job is satisfying because of the personal connection. But I have to ask her why there's such a demand for it on the clients' side.

“Why?” Miyabi asks. “Because this is all a lie.”

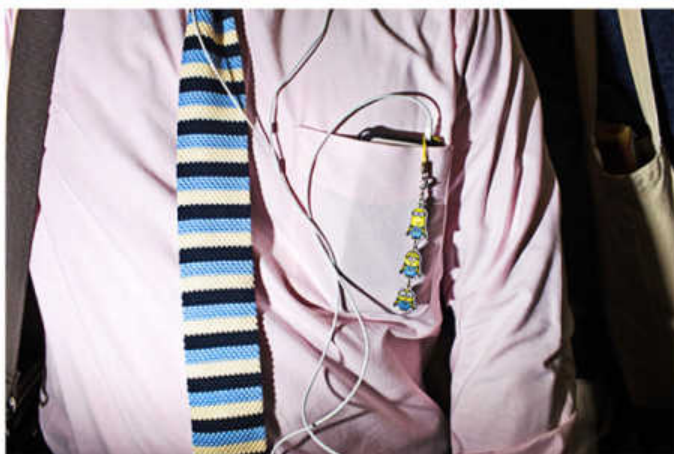
MY FRIEND YUMI IS PETITE, with birdlike features made more birdlike by her human-scale fedora. She speaks good English but still wobbles, so her husband, Taka, joins us. They're one of those sweet and unassuming couples that exist just to radiate koala-like gentleness. The afternoon is steamy, and we're in the back of a tiny, dark *izakaya* in the city's jumbly Sengenjaya neighborhood. It has been a day since Miyabi, the equivalent of a month in unmoored Tokyo time. I've walked through indomitably cute toy stores and narrow alleys thick with yakitori smoke. I've stared at white-gloved parking attendants and a poster showing a muscular cartoon figure winding up to punch someone. FLOOR INFORMATION, the poster said. From my miniature Airbnb studio, 10 stories up, I've tried unsuccessfully to snap everything into some kind of mental framework. Possibly I need some floor information.

I am grateful for my pretend friends.

As we nibble at pork with ginger, Yumi cheerfully tells me about the gigs she has had since joining Client Partners. (The six-year-old agency is the largest in Japan, with eight branches across Tokyo and another that recently opened in Osaka.) There was the mystery writer who wanted her to read the novel he'd toiled away at for 10 years. Another man needed someone to talk with about his aging parents—not in person, but via months of emails. Like Miyabi, Yumi works weddings. For one she was hired to play the sister of the bride, a real living woman who herself was in a family feud that precluded her attendance. The mother of the bride was also a rental. The two impostors got along swimmingly.

Yumi explains that these are just the more theatrical gigs. The bulk of her clients? They





just want basic, uncomplicated companionship. From Yumi's vantage point, the breadth and depth of that need says something profound about her country.

There's a word in Japanese, *gaman*, that translates roughly as stoic forbearance in the face of the unbearable. It's a deep-seated Japanese value, this idea that you suck it up no matter what's happening. A lot has been happening lately. Anxiety and depression spiked after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, according to the World Health Organization. The country itself is shrinking, its population plummeting and aging rapidly. And there's the apparently growing problem of people who literally work themselves to death; a third of suicides have been attributed to overwork. All of that, Yumi and Taka say, but you act like everything's fine. I gather this is the lie Miyabi was referring to.

Enter the rent-a-friend. Not a miracle cure, no. But maybe a pressure valve. "With us," Yumi says, "people can talk about their feelings without worrying what their real friends think."

After lunch we roam a warren of 100-yen stores nearby—100 yen for a dusty old mug, for a weird cat statue, for a pouch of dried plums. Before parting ways at the subway entrance, we ask someone to snap our photo. That funny kinship that forms in front of a camera—the arms around each other, the shared self-consciousness—seems to happen for us, too. Yumi writes her address in my notebook, draws a cartoon of herself in her fedora. "Send me the picture," she writes beside it. It's almost as though she really means it.

DURING MY TIME IN TOKYO I develop a seamless routine of leaving the apartment, drifting vaguely toward the address on my phone, squinting confusedly, doubling back, eating some gyoza, and eventually stumbling onto my destination. On a drizzly Friday morning, my destination is the Client Partners headquarters, a small but airy suite in a nondescript Shibuya district office building. I rope my translator in for this, and we're met by a round-faced woman in a long robe-like garment. Maki Abe is the CEO, and for the next hour we sit across a desk from her and talk not about wacky interest-kitsch but about a nation's spiritual health.

"We look like a rich country from the outside, but mentally we have problems," Maki says. She speaks slowly, methodically. "Japan is all about face. We don't know how to talk from the gut. We can't ask for help. So many people are alone with their problems, and stuck, and their hearts aren't touching."

Maki and I bowed when we met, but we also shook hands. She brings it up later. "There are many people who haven't been touched for years. We have clients who start to cry when we shake hands with them."

It's not that people lack friends, she says. Facebook, Instagram—scroll around and you find a country bursting with mugging, partying companionship. It just isn't real, that's all. "There's a real me and a masked me. We have a word for the lonely gap in between that: *kodoku*."

Maki attributes some of this to World War II. Spiritual consciousness was widespread before that, she says. "Harmony and helping each other was the national spirit. Now we've got selfishness instead. Not even people looking out for their own families, just themselves."

I don't know. I've yet to encounter a country without a similar narrative: Things were better, now they're worse. Maybe the CEO of a friendship rental company can't help but see fissures in the psychic landscape, or maybe the crisis is real. Regardless, Maki wants to fix it, one synthetic relationship at a time. Before we part, she stops me. Am I aware of Client Partners' ultimate goal? I am not. To render itself unnecessary, she says.



With that, I head back out to the street, where the morning's gentle rain has exploded into great lashing sheets. I watch for a while from under an awning, then decide to just get wet.

Tokyo is too overwhelming to explore with an unfocused mind. It will break that mind. But go in with something specific to mull, and this alternately churning and serene metropolis makes a pleasantly delirious backdrop. Me,



MIZUHO

Age 40

Résumé

Former urban corporate drone, now a part-time rent-a-friend also pursuing a career in wellness, growing herbs in a big field near her home, 90 minutes outside Tokyo.

I'm pondering a phenomenon I've flown 5,000 miles to understand. Inherent absurdity and all, the rent-a-friend industry holds for me the perverse promise of elucidating something real about friendship. By dragging this sometimes nebulous kind of relationship into the realm of commerce, I reason, maybe Miyabi et al can clarify things a bit.

Arguably I'm extra primed to hear the wisdom of people who are literally pros at being friends. I recently turned 40. When we were 22 or so, some close friends and I formed an only-half-joking kind of men's group. Each month we'd meet at some grimy bar and aim for a

structured discussion of how we were doing. The hope was to lock in some habits of openness that seemed lacking in the older men we saw, and to not become reclusive and boring and taciturn in middle age. Looking back now, I think, we also just wanted to keep friendship front and center, to never stop with the profound and idiotic nights at the grimy bars.

Nearly two decades in, I'd say we've avoided



YUSUKE

Day job
Selling office
furniture

**What sales and
being a rent-
a-friend have
in common**

*"Express curios-
ity, open up
about yourself
first. It's a show."*

**No. 1 rent-a-
friend rule**
*No alcohol on
duty*

taciturn and reclusive, slipped a little on the boring and open front. But keeping friendship truly central? That's a tall order. When you're young, friendship is pure, a perfect and drunken snowflake. But as you get older, you see it can be complicated. Are my decades-old relationships truly superior to the commercial variety? OK, yes, duh. But they're also more problematic. Even with one's dearest friends someone invariably feels slighted or underappreciated now and then. Say what you will about rent-a-friends, but they bypass that whole dynamic. You don't wonder about such a friend's real feelings about you because

you know them—in fact, they abide by a clearly delineated rate. With the matter of intention taken off the table, you're free to focus on just having a nice time, on connecting in that very moment.

The rain lets up before I quite decide to trade my dearest amateur friends for platonic prostitutes, but I suppose I could put a few on notice.



“
I’ve
paid for
every
word
Yusuke
has
uttered,
but I’m
also
certain
we’ve
forged
something
genuine.”

MY FRIEND YUSUKE IS A GUY. He stands out with a big mop of hair, a goofy laugh, and old-soul eyes—but when I meet my final friend tonight, it’s his maleness that distinguishes him most in a sea of female rent-a-friends.

By day, Yusuke sells furniture to corporate offices—a job, he concedes, that involves similar moves to being a friend. (“Express curiosity, open up about yourself first. It’s a show.”) But artifice and all, he’s a sweet and unguarded sprite of a fellow. He lived in various countries as a student and honed that easygoing adaptability common among kids

who bounce around. He expresses curiosity and opens up.

We meet at the subway station in Yoyogi, and soon he’s leading me down a dark, wet street to a rickety *okonomiyaki* joint. Within a few minutes he’s showing me how to cook our own savory pancakes on the tabletop stove between us.

Like many Japanese people, he works 10-hour days, then often spends the rest of the night with those same colleagues, eating or drinking till all hours. Tonight, I gather, is a welcome break from that routine. We talk about childhood and relationships and aging. Because our temperaments align, or because I’m comfy in Tokyo by now, or because we’re both guys, conversation is easy. At one point the waiter offers us drinks. Yusuke says no alcohol on duty, and I realize I’d forgotten this was duty at all. I’ve paid for every word Yusuke has uttered, but I’m also certain we’ve forged something genuine. I have never hired a prostitute. Maybe it’s easier to believe their professed affections than I’d imagined, even as the money is right there in front of you. Maybe life is complicated. Maybe affection can be paid for and real at the same time.

Toward the end of our meal, Yusuke and I find ourselves discussing our grandfathers. It was meant to be a conversation about how social life evolves with age, but it becomes one about World War II. Both men had served, ostensibly, I suppose, trying to kill one another somewhere in the South Pacific. Each, we agree, had been deeply affected by those years. The sins of our respective countries could have plunged the meal into awkwardness, but in fact the opposite happened. In clumsily assuring each other of our good intentions—thoughtful questions! sympathetic nods!—we plunged into a funny sweetness instead.

When later we part ways, we’ll agree to stay in touch, and though we won’t, we’ll mean it in that moment. In the weeks ahead it will occur to me I’m grateful for all the elements—the smell of the pancakes, the talk of grandfathers, the wet pavement outside. Years from now, those things might just remind me of another wacky cultural phenomenon that took hold in Japan. Or they might summon the memory of this nice furniture salesman named Yusuke, a mop-headed guy who, for a couple hours one night in Tokyo, started to become a friend. **A**

Contributing writer Chris Colin wrote about living the dream in Kauai in the May 2015 issue of AFAR. Photographer Landon Nordeman is profiled on page 22.

A CENTURY OF INSPIRATION

FOR 100 YEARS, ARTISTS HAVE BEEN STRIVING TO CAPTURE THE BEAUTY, GRANDEUR, AND SURPRISE OF AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS.



MIKAEL KENNEDY
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK
2012



NICK MEEK

EL CAPITAN MEADOWS, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK
2011





Talk about suffering for art. Philadelphia painter Thomas Moran had barely sat in a saddle in his life. But here he was, urging a mule over the Rockies, on assignment from the U.S. Geological Survey to capture on canvas the rumored wonders of Yellowstone.

Moran's journey in the summer of 1871 was a triumph. He painted hot springs, he painted geysers, he painted *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, one of the masterpieces of American landscape art. His works helped convince Congress to set aside Yellowstone as the world's first national park the following year.

Still, Moran had raised a haunting aesthetic conundrum. When he first set eyes on Yellowstone's great canyon, he deemed it "beyond the reach of human art."

That has been the quandary ever since. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service. (Some individual parks, like Yellowstone, predated the government agency.) Our parks enshrine the country at its most majestic—canyons and mountaintops and coral reefs. How the hell does an artist do them justice?

Some artists went for brilliant drama. Moran later painted Arizona's Grand Canyon in a Sturm und Drang style befitting a backdrop for a Southwestern production of *The Ring Cycle*. Photographers employed a cooler, black-and-white eye. The same year the Park Service was founded, a 14-year-old San Francisco boy made his first trip to Yosemite. Young Ansel Adams wanted to be a concert pianist. On his first morning in the park his parents gave him a Brownie box camera. Adams eventually changed his career plans.

Contemporary artists are drawn not just to our parks' landscapes (Death Valley dunes, Wrangell-St. Elias peaks) but also to an element earlier artists tended to leave out: the people, the nearly 300 million of us who visit the parks each year. We pose by Crater Lake, we swim in a river in Yellowstone. And just as Moran did, we gaze at the scenery and ask, how could any artist approach that? Call it the greatest of American challenges—making art that can stand alongside the glories that inspire it. —PETER FISH

ROGER MINICK
COUPLE TAKING POLAROID'S, CRATER LAKE NATIONAL PARK
1980

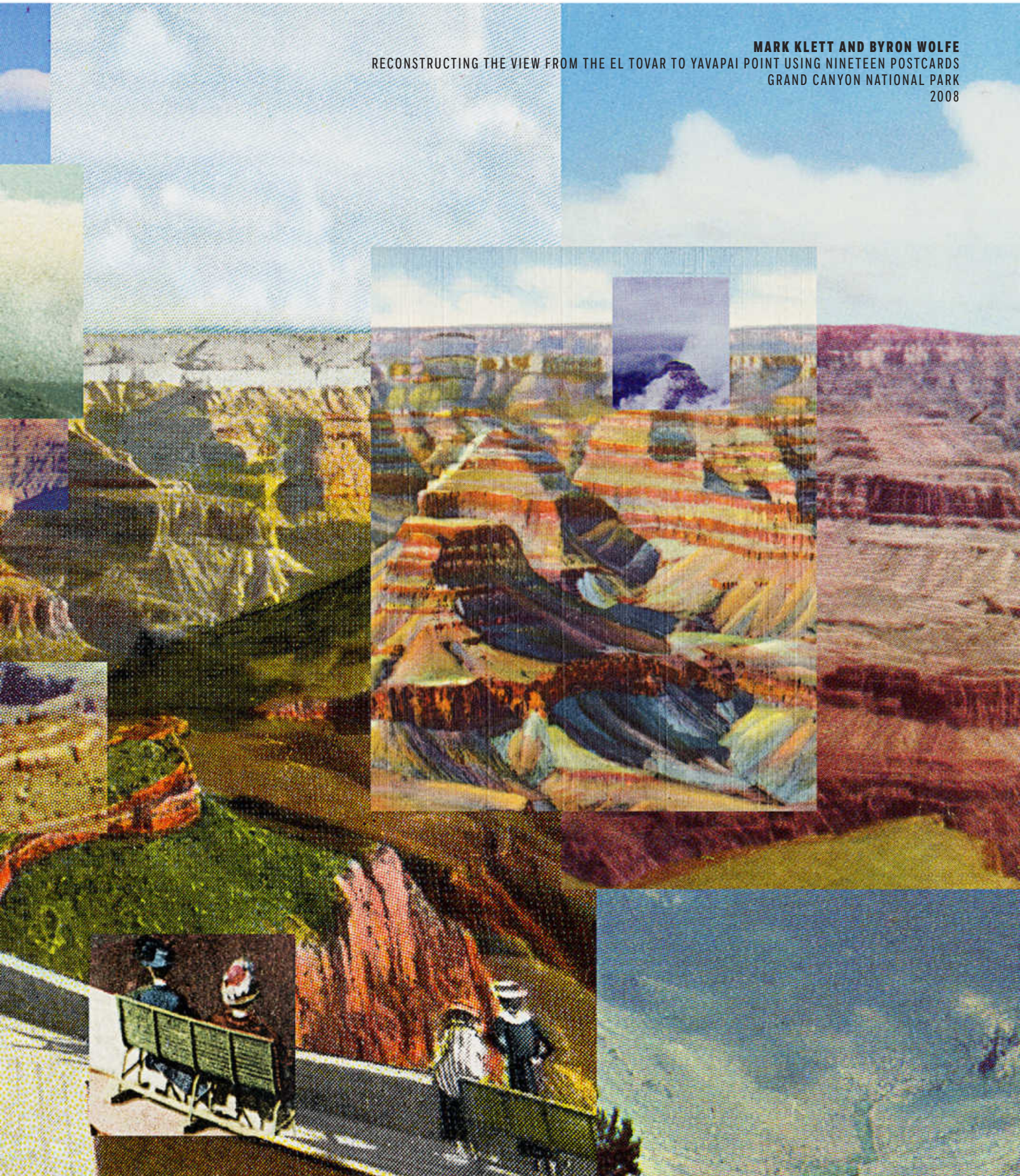


MINOR WHITE
MOENCOPi STRATA, CAPITOL REEF NATIONAL PARK
1962





MARK KLETT AND BYRON WOLFE
RECONSTRUCTING THE VIEW FROM THE EL TOVAR TO YAVAPAI POINT USING NINETEEN POSTCARDS
GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK
2008



DAVID BENJAMIN SHERRY
SUNRISE ON MESQUITE FLAT DUNES, DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK
2013



PETER MARLOW
THE BOILING RIVER
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK
1992



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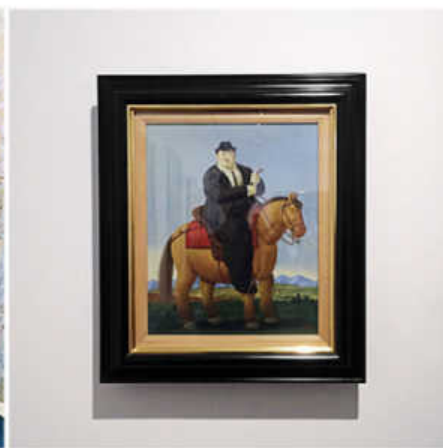
WHO: JASON SELDON, AFAR ART DIRECTOR

DURATION: 10 DAYS

SOUVENIR: A BOTTLE OF AGUARDIENTE

JUST BACK FROM

Colombia



"My friend and I travel together every year. Our only requirements are that the destination should be warm and have good food, and we can't know the language well (just to keep it interesting). This year, that led us to Colombia.

We drank coffee at Franca, a café in the Chapinero district of Bogotá, saw horse-drawn carriages in Cartagena, and took in the view of Medellín from a hillside park. Cartagena was the biggest sensory overload. **We stayed in the historic center, at the Casa San Agustín**, a respite from the busy city. The street names are different on every block, so you can't really go looking for places. Instead, we took the days as they came. **One night, we joined a spontaneous street party**. Everyone from college kids to seniors was salsa dancing. At one point, a woman grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the crowd. At first I was embarrassed because I didn't know the steps, but as I looked at the happy people around me, I fell into the moment." —AS TOLD TO SARAH PURKRABEK



Let's
Go
Places



WHAT'S NEXT

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